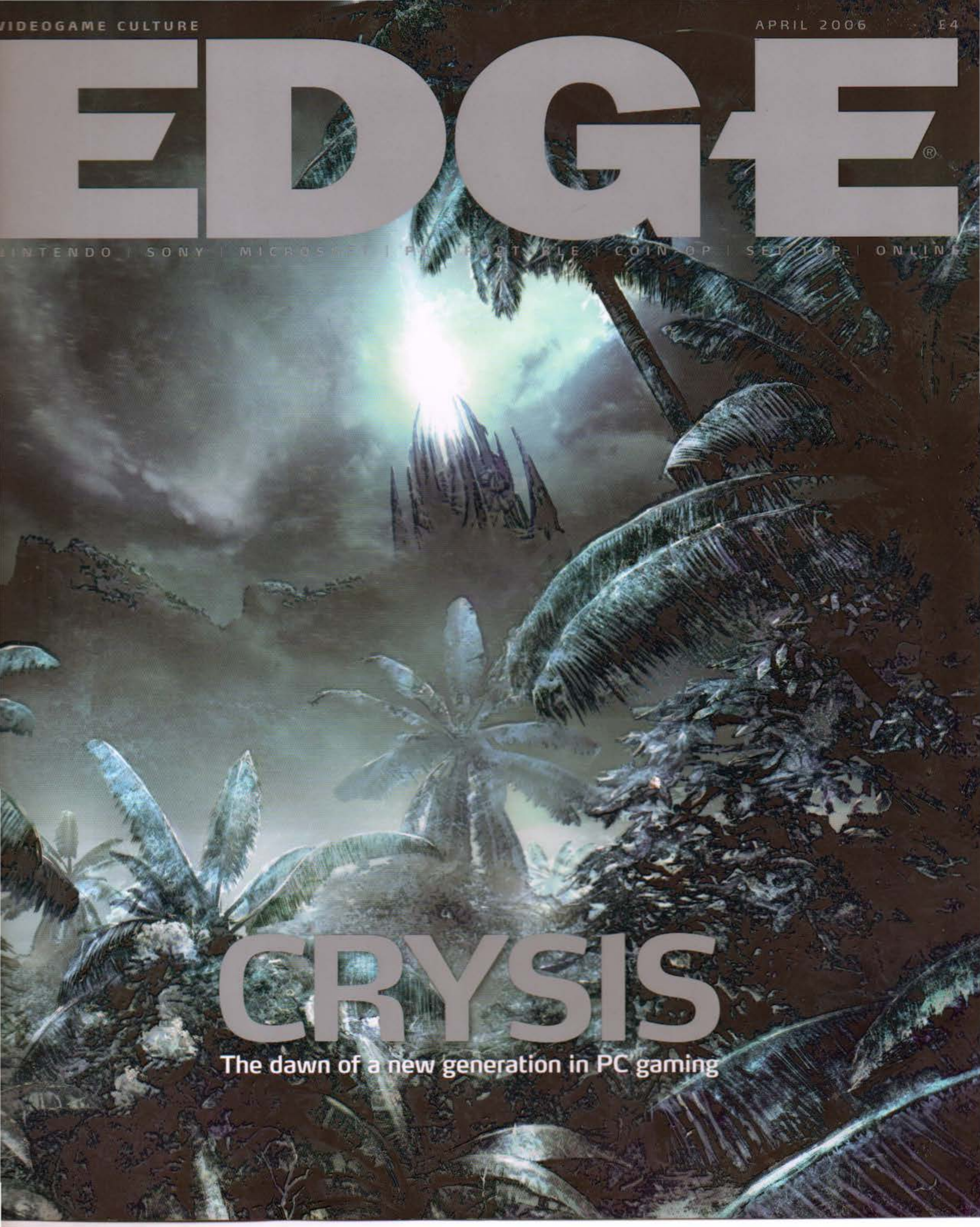
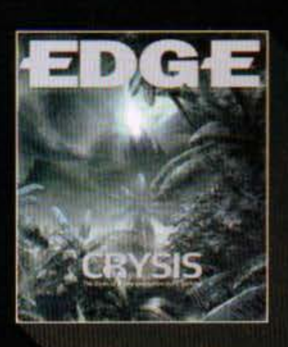

VIDEOGAME CULTURE
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CRYSIS
The dawn of a new generation in PC gaming


MILK CHOCOLATE EASTER EGG
MILK CHOCOLATE EASTER EGG



Pop quiz: what was the last Electronic Arts game to feature on the cover of **Edge**? Tricky one, isn't it? OK, pop quiz round two: what was the last PC title to feature on the cover of **Edge**? That's a little easier. You have to go back six years to find the EA game (issue 80's *Black & White*) and nearly three to find the PC title (issue 124's *Half-Life 2*). And yet here we are with a PC game from EA on page one of the magazine. What is happening?

The truth is, **Edge** has often been perceived as a videogame magazine for console owners, when in fact, despite what the aforementioned evidence may suggest, the PC as a gaming platform has always remained squarely in our sights. (It has, after all, been a long time since it moved out of its pigeonhole as the home of rigid flight sims and backward-looking RPGs.) Right now, with the console gaming scene offering up increasing signs of homogenisation – yes, even with the likes of *Shadow Of The Colossus* and *We Love Katamari* appearing on PAL PS2s – there's all the more reason to look to this unbound space for innovation.

And innovation is everywhere in PC gaming, from the dogged and fruitful pursuits of game-modding groups to the creation of revolutionary new types of online gaming communities to the simple art of rendering reality in the most convincing manner you've ever seen in a realtime gaming environment. Which brings us, of course, to *Crysis*, from German developer Crytek. Read about what's threatening to be a staggering achievement on page 52. (And don't forget that the game is being published by EA. And don't toss aside the implications of that, either. And, finally, please don't write in about *that* review of *Doom*. We try to forget it.)



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"I hate it when they talk during the movie"







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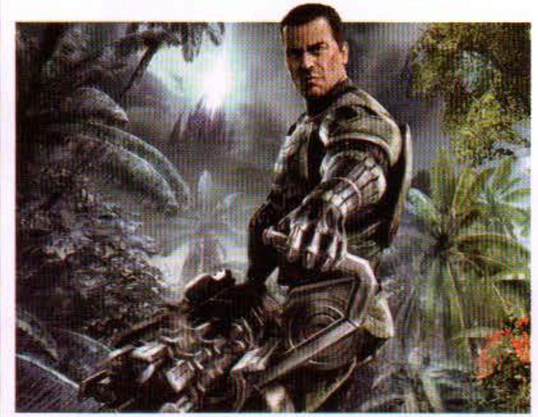


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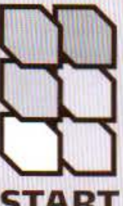


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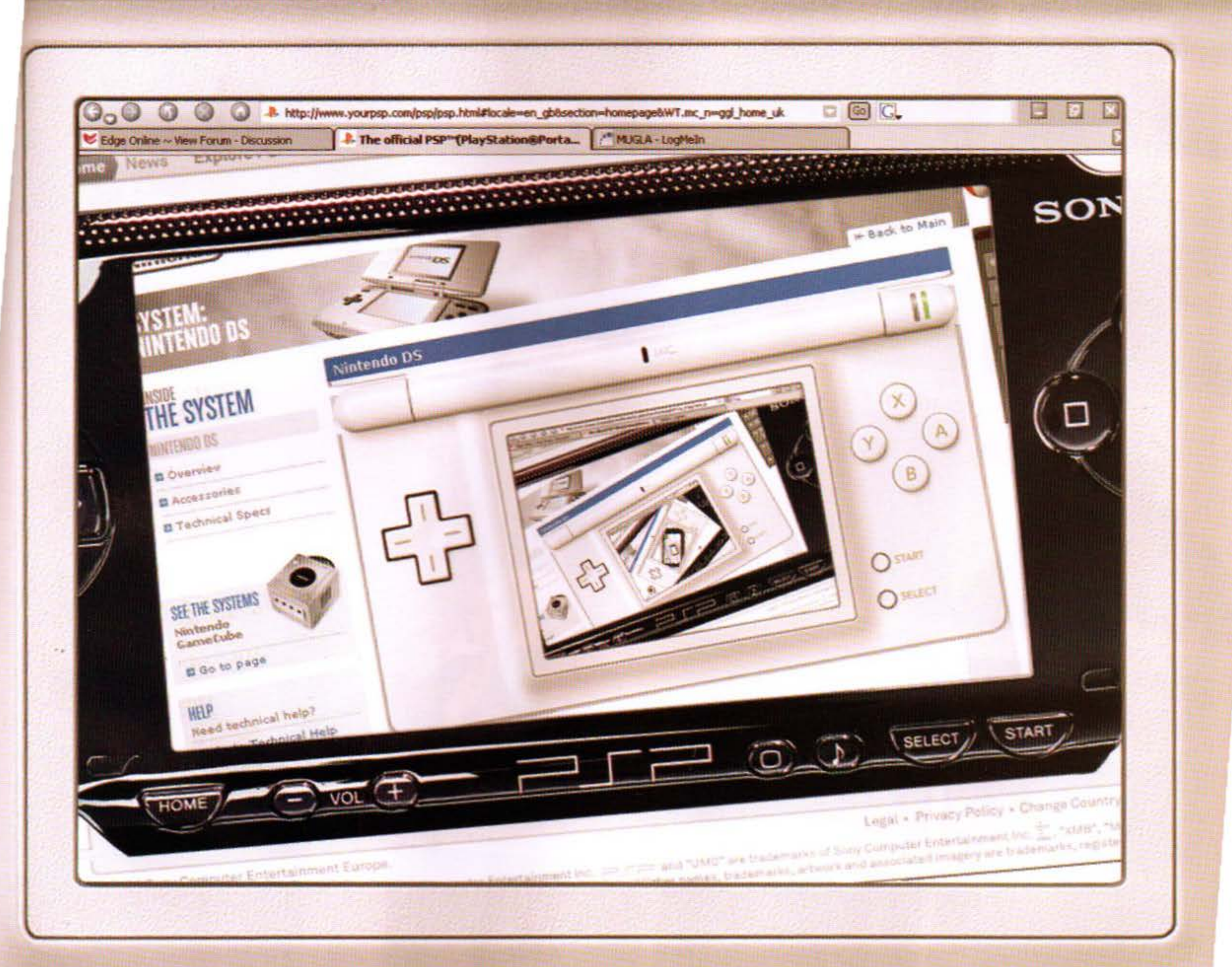
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MIC.







HARDWARE

DS vs PSP (part two)

Nintendo and Sony prepare to face off in the territory outside of gaming

There's seldom been a format war as starkly defined and fiercely ideological as that between the Sony PSP and Nintendo DS. The machines' makers have both, at one time or another, argued that their products are so different that they don't really compete at all – but it's just that differentiation which has scored such deep battle-lines in the sand. Sony has sought to stamp its mark on the handheld console market with serious technological firepower and multimedia capabilities – music, photo and video playback, UMD movies, and in an early firmware update, wifi internet browsing – that would take the fight to other kinds of portable devices. Nintendo, meanwhile, has sought to revolutionise it from within, with a singleminded focus on innovations in interaction that would change games themselves. To some degree, they've both already succeeded.

But on February 15, at its annual DS Conference in Tokyo, Nintendo announced that it will bring web-browsing and digital TV reception to the DS in Japan. Though hardly unexpected, these new add-ons for the machine mark a sudden strategic shift away from the company's oft-stated focus on pure gaming. Is Nintendo coming around to Sony's way of thinking?

The DS's web browser is being developed in conjunction with Norway's Opera Software, already a specialist in pocket internet access via its Opera Mini and Opera Mobile products for mobile phones. Like the PSP, it will provide internet access in any wifi hotspot or wireless home or office network. Unlike the Sony machine's free firmware browser, however, Opera for DS will be sold on and run from a regular DS game card. Nintendo expects to launch it in June for ¥3,800 (£19), a little less than a full-price game release. There is no confirmation of a western version, but a spokesman said Nintendo was considering bringing a similar product to overseas markets, and given the enthusiastic response to the DS's wifi gaming service in the US and Europe, there would seem to be few barriers to its eventual worldwide release.



Although it hasn't set a date, Sony has said that it plans to launch the LocationFree streaming service in the UK before the end of the year. The base unit contains its own TV tuner, and even an infrared emitter to allow DVD control

The DS's Japan-only digital TV receiver plugs in to the main card slot and has a retractable aerial

The main browsing mode for Opera on DS will feature an overview of the current web page on the touchscreen, and a zoomed-in detail on the screen above; presumably, the touchscreen can be used to scroll around as well as input text

It seems a bold move to charge for something your competition offers for free, but with Nintendo president Satoru Iwata announcing yet another Japanese sales milestone for the DS at the same conference – six million units sold in record time – boldness is a luxury the company can easily afford. Some will argue that Opera for DS will be worth the extra, too. Offering touchscreen link selection and text input via either an onscreen keypad or character recognition, and with the flexibility of display across the DS's two screens outweighing their small size, it should be a far more practical proposition for day-to-day internet use than the PSP's functional, but clumsy, browser.



Very much a mock-up – neither new colours of DS Lite nor the exact appearance of the Opera browser have been confirmed – this is how DS browsing may look later in the year. The obvious appeal of stylus control will no doubt be a strong selling point for the software

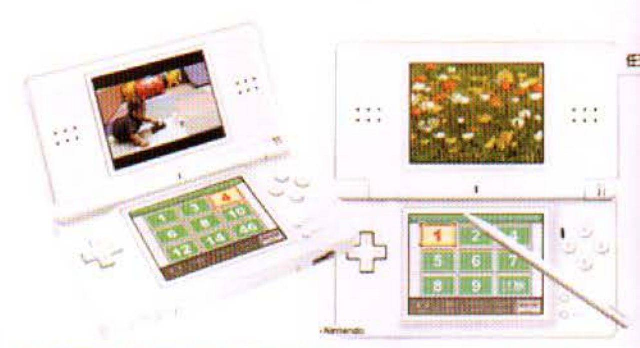


Opera for DS's price tag is also a telling sign that Nintendo's and Sony's philosophies with regard to multimedia convergence are still a long way from converging themselves. For Sony, a media conglomerate as well as an electronics giant, with a vested interest in any and all avenues of content delivery, multimedia capabilities are necessarily integral. For Nintendo, they're merely a new revenue stream, and a chance to shore up the rapidly expanding non-gamer audience attracted to DS by the *Brain Training* games (it's no coincidence that, at the DS conference, Opera shared the limelight with announcements of calligraphy and cooking-related software). Hence its decision to go for the relatively soft targets of broadcast TV and internet, these being freely-available media that don't raise the thorny distribution and copy-protection issues of video and music, in which area Apple and its iPod/iTunes pairing have in any case already built an intimidating lead.

For Sony, multimedia capabilities are necessarily integral. For Nintendo, they're merely a new revenue stream, and a chance to shore up the rapidly expanding non-gamer audience



There's something pleasingly retro – if a little inconvenient – about the retractable aerial for the DS digital television receiver. It's unlikely to dent the add-on's appeal in Japan, however



When watching TV on the DS via the new receiver, the top screen shows the picture while the touchscreen works as a remote control, giving quick access to different channels

Details of the TV tuner are more sketchy. No price or date was announced by Nintendo, although it's expected to reach Japanese stores before the end of the year. In the form shown it's a surprisingly small, neat unit with an extendable antenna that fits into the DS card slot at the back of the machine, putting it out of the way behind the top screen when in use. The TV image will be shown on the top screen, with the touchscreen providing all the functions of a TV remote. Crucially, the device will comply with Japan's new '1seg' standard for digital TV broadcasts to mobile receivers, a service that's planned to go live on April 1 this year, which will also be supported by high-end mobile phones. With plans for similar services much less advanced in the US and Europe, and support in these areas rallying around the rival DVB-H standard, a western release for the DS TV tuner has to be considered far less likely than for the Opera browser.

Sony has stolen a march in this area: it's possible to watch live TV on your PSP right now, in the US at least. But Sony's solution is far more complex, more powerful, and considerably more expensive than Nintendo's tuner. In late 2005, the company announced (and then underlined at CES in January of this year) that the PSP would from version 2.5 of its firmware be compatible with its LocationFree system. Essentially a personal internet streaming service, LocationFree is a $350 base unit that connects to your home broadband connection, PC, DVD player, cable or satellite box and digital video recorder, and then allows you to stream video from any of these devices over the internet to wherever you are in the world. Initially only compatible with a dedicated portable TV unit, it now supports Sony laptops and the PSP. There are some limitations – you can't change cable TV channels, say, nor of course DVDs, and with PSP you'll need to be in a wifi hotspot to access it – but it's an incredibly flexible system, giving international access to your local TV programming, among other things. It is, however, aimed squarely at the very highest end of the consumer electronics marketplace, and it won't be affordable or practical for many PSP owners.

In the long run, though, the PSP's multimedia future may not lie in LocationFree but in UMD movies (see 'New MDs') and more conventional online distribution methods. A video download service entitled Portable TV offering anything from free film trailers to pay-per-view episodes of popular TV anime has been available to Japanese PSP owners since July of last year, albeit only through users' PCs and





The PSP's built-in browser, which arrived as part of a firmware update, has the great advantage of being free and not requiring a separate cart. However, despite the very sensible presentation of the software, scrolling round sites can still be laborious – unless, like www.edge-online.com/psp, they're specially configured

Sony's own ISP company, So-net. But to truly prove itself in this area, Sony needs to make a success of Sony Connect, its iTunes rival. The company's vast media holdings – its acquisition of MGM last year gives it the largest film library of any studio – are both a blessing and a curse in this undertaking. They furnish it with unrivalled internal libraries, but rob it of the neutrality that has been crucial to Apple's ubiquity to date. What's more, Connect has lagged far behind the visionary iTunes in terms of robustness, usability and integration.

Sony does have an ace up its sleeve, however; according to a recent Variety report, Connect will soon cut out the middle-man, or rather, the middle-machine. It's claimed that the company has ambitious plans to overhaul the Connect service in 2006, and that these revolve around delivering content direct to PSP and PS3. If this is true – and there's no reason not to believe it – the thought of removing one more step in the content delivery chain is an attractive one indeed, and could be a vital differentiator for Sony in this fiercely competitive market. The company's CES presentation did make mention of a PSP-specific Sony Connect service launching in March and offering full-length movies and even games for download, but at the time of writing, the details – including, crucially, such issues as pricing and whether an intermediary PC will be needed – remain frustratingly vague. At present the most obvious hurdle to the eventual success of such a service is the PSP's memory capacity, but with 1Gb Memory Sticks becoming much more affordable, and larger sizes coming on the market, it may be a surmountable one.

Although it has recently explored media players in the form of the GBA's Play-Yan device, there's no indication that Nintendo has any intention of following Sony into these shark-infested waters. For now, it seems likely that it will be left to third parties like Datel, with its 4Gb Max Media addon, to cater to those consumers who want the DS to match the PSP feature for feature, or outrank an iPod in the tussle for bag space. For all that they completely transform the capabilities of the handheld, and seem to contradict Nintendo's aggressively purist stance, the Opera browser and TV tuner are probably best viewed as the latest in a long line of sidelines for a company that has always dabbled with such extensions for its consoles, but never truly committed to them. This, after all, is the company that gave some Japanese homes their first modem way back in the Famicom days, and beat mobile phones to low-cost, low-quality digital photography with the Game Boy Camera. The DS's explosive performance in Japan may have prompted Nintendo to widen its field of view – and Opera for DS stands a genuine chance of becoming a leading mobile browser – but Sony can rest assured that, when it comes to the race to be the Walkman of the 21st century, it's still iPod that's standing in PSP's way.

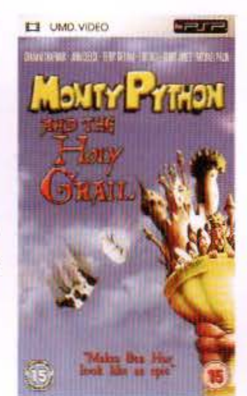


Datel's MAX Media Player for DS is a tiny 4Gb hard drive that plugs into the GBA cartridge slot and sits underneath the machine, with its attendant media player software on a DS game card, and a PC application that converts and resizes video to fit. It's arriving in late March, but at £130, it's hardly a bargain

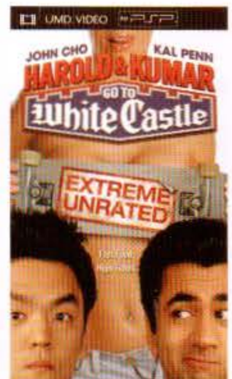
New MDs

Just how successful is Sony's PSP video disc format proving to be?

PSP's most high-profile multimedia feature – in stores at least, where they have enjoyed excellent point-of-sale prominence – is of course the availability of films to buy on UMD. The format got off to a flying start, with sales seemingly matching those of PSP games unit for unit, and reaching the half-million mark in six months, far faster than DVD did at its launch. But in February, Sony Pictures, Paramount and Warner all stated that they would be cutting back their UMD movie release slates following lower than expected sales. Retailers are expected to follow suit and slash shelf-space; just as Xbox and GameCube have been marginalised in shops by the arrival of Xbox 360, so UMD is likely to be squeezed by new high-definition DVD ranges later this year. Part of the problem is the PSP's limited demographic reach: the position Napoleon Dynamite and Beavis & Butthead enjoy as top sellers is telling, and consequently classic film releases such as GoodFellas are being cancelled. Another is simply consumer resistance to buying films twice, and though Sony is responding with two-in-one DVD packs and talk of an adaptor allowing UMDs to be viewed on a TV, it may be too little, too late to prevent another Sony format going the way of the MiniDisc.







The nature of the titles selling especially well on UMD – especially Napoleon Dynamite – give a clear indication of the limit of the format's current demographic reach. Can Sony expand this in time?

Newswire



No sale for SCi

Following Jane Cavanagh's confirmation last issue that the company was obliged to grant an audience to potential buyers, SCi, which last year completed its acquisition of Eidos, this month declared that it has terminated all discussions over potential buyouts. Share prices rose recently as rumours of a takeover took hold, but that trend is unlikely to continue following the company's announcement that: "The board does not believe that it is in the company's or the shareholders' interests to prolong talks any further." This does, however, tally with Cavanagh's insistence last issue that SCi's interests for the near-future lay solely with bolstering the IP and management policy of Eidos, and meeting its financial targets for 2006.

amBX

HARDWARE

AmBX hits sensory overload

Philips' demonstration of its ambitious ambient-effects platform packs a punch, but do we really want to be sent reeling?



Tabula Rasa

Philips looks to the future

AmBX isn't the only foray into eccentric interactive technology being made by Philips' research departments, and it might not be the one with the most potential for gaming, either. At January's Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas the company unveiled the Entertaible, a 30" tabletop LCD touchscreen device that's capable of sensing at least 45 objects on its surface. Philips understandably views the concept, created by its Eindhoven research lab, as an ideal platform for digital boardgames, and potentially as a group workstation for schools and businesses. It will initially pitch it at bars and casinos, but if the price can be made palatable and there's support from big boardgame brands, it's easy to imagine demand for a home version being considerable. With DS already showing how tactile control can stimulate new game styles and markets, this arm of Philips' innovation looks genuinely forward-thinking.

Tucked away in a Philips research lab in Redhill, Surrey, a large flatscreen in a dark, plush, modern-styled home-cinema lounge is showing a firstperson rollercoaster ride from Atari's *RollerCoaster Tycoon 3*. But this screening has a definite difference... As the coaster turns toward a sunset, coloured lights in the ceiling, behind the screen and behind two tall blinds to either side of it wash the room in orange and yellow. As it turns away, those colours spin around the room to uplighters at its back, and the area around the screen fades through deep blue to black. Lightning flashes onscreen are mimicked by strobe effects in the room; the coaster's clanking ascent is accompanied by ferocious vibration under the black leather sofas, and on its hurtling descent, two floor-standing fans blow a steady rush of air into the audience's incredulous faces.

Lightning flashes onscreen are mimicked by strobe; the coaster's clanking ascent accompanied by ferocious vibration under the sofas; two fans blow a steady rush of air

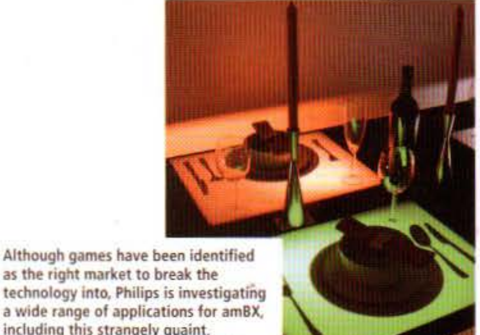
This is the concept room that's used to demonstrate amBX, Philips' platform for projecting audiovisual entertainment into the room with dynamic surround lighting and other ambient effects. Containing more than 50 amBX-enabled devices, it's certainly imposing, but, insists chief marketing officer **Jo Cooke**, not too far-fetched. "It'll be a number of years before people have rooms like this – but not that many," she states. But her confidence isn't all that easy to share.

The fact is that *Rollercoaster Tycoon* is by far the most logical and entertaining demonstration of the system that Philips has up and running right now, and that is inescapably because it's a simulation of a two-minute fairground ride. In other contexts, the amBX experience threatens to be more distracting than immersive, and difficult to endure for long periods.

Jo Cooke, left, and David Eves are behind the amBX technology push at Philips

During clips from amBX's star signing, *Broken Sword 3*, and the animated film *Robots* (Philips intends to expand into DVD support after games), the subtlety and smoothness of the lighting transitions leaves a lot to be desired, too often drawing your eyes away from the screen. And a reel of *Sonic Heroes* – a frantic minute of sickening thumps from the sofa-rumble and kaleidoscopic whirls and flashes of vivid colour – is actually quite unpleasant. The pulsing disco lights of a *Dance: UK* demo make sense, of course, but do nothing that hasn't been available to wedding DJs for decades.

This, to be fair, is amBX's conceptual far future, and a more realistic vision of what might be in homes by the end of this year – when amBX will launch on PC – lies next door. A laptop is surrounded by four small tower-lights, with four



Although games have been identified as the right market to break the technology into, Philips is investigating a wide range of applications for amBX, including this strangely quaint, interactive and ambient dining table







Just out of shot in front of the sofa are two fans that deliver gusts of air in fast-moving moments. As ridiculous as they seem, airflow effects are actually the most effective and entertaining component of the amBX package





Although it's obviously less overpowering than the main demonstration room, this 'realistic' PC installation still failed to convince during a live gameplay demonstration of *Broken Sword 3*, and raised questions about how practical and effective amBX setups in less optimised living spaces can be

wall-washers above and behind the screen, a compact desk fan to one side and a rumble strip in front of the keyboard. These are still concept designs: amBX is currently hammering out licensing deals with peripheral manufacturers and can't even confirm hardware support from Philips itself, although that can be taken as read, and announcements are expected "very shortly".

Cooke reckons that a very similar mid-range starter kit will be on sale by Christmas for around $200, while amBX's inventor **David Eves** suggests two tower lights, one backlight and the rumble strip as a bare minimum. Because amBX is a scripting language that works in abstractions, it's fully scalable, and Philips expects users to build and customise their own setups: the only limitation on the number of devices you sport is the number of USB ports you have.

Philips can't formally announce a software compatibility line-up yet, although again, *Broken Sword 3* and its forthcoming sequel seem to be a given. In addition to this there will apparently be support for 'a handful' of releases at the end of the year, which will include a mixture of new games and back-catalogue patches. However, all amBX devices will ship with an application that can apply simple lighting effects to any game in the manner of Philips' backlit Ambilight flat-panel TVs, as well as an amBX-enabled media player and, rather frighteningly, an Internet Explorer plugin to allow amBX-enabled web pages.

As it stands, Philips expects to make money from licensing to peripheral manufacturers, who, says Cooke, are enthusiastic about a standardised bridge between themselves and game developers: "With amBX, they finally have the freedom to make what they want, and don't need to have the relationship with the content providers. It decouples them, but provides them with a lot more scope." Although the company is at pains to point out the positive reception it has received from developers too, it's obvious that Philips is currently having to do much of the heavy lifting to ensure software support, with some help from outsource specialist Sumo Digital.

"Our estimate is that it's typically about two man months of work to enable a game," says Eves. "As part of our licence agreement we will support an engineering effort to do the vast majority of that work. This means the effect on developers and on their schedules is minimal." He doesn't rule out software licensing in the long run, though. "Our observation is that there is value in content – because people have said that they would be willing to pay more for amBX-enabled content. Whether or not we can have that value…" He laughs and shrugs.

Philips is confident it will be able to support all game consoles as early as next year – "Technically it's no more difficult… It's more of a marketing discussion," says Eves – while the anticipated integration with home cinema is more of an unknown. "With music and video, it's a longer standardisation discussion, with Hollywood needing to be involved. We're in that process but it will take time." The true unknown is whether amBX's appeal will ever extend beyond the hardware-obsessed, hardcore PC market Philips is rightly targeting first, never mind beyond games and even movies, to be, in Cooke's grand term, "a new content" in its own right. Stepping out of that demo room in Surrey, it's hard to escape the feeling that amBX's brash lightshows represent a rather outdated vision of the future, and that faced with its reality, many will decide they never wanted it in the first place.



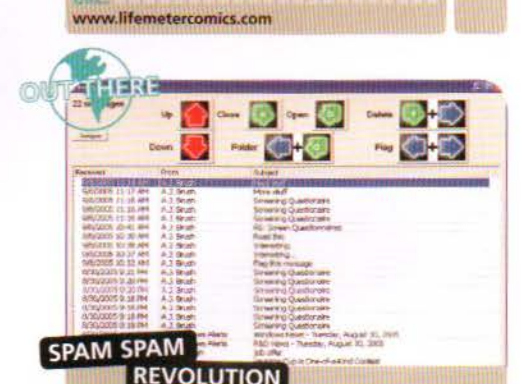
WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Showing all the same inspiration and artistic vision that Raina Lee's 1up 'zine and the iam8bit show have brought to the community, Lifemeter editors Zack Giallongo, Dave Roman and Stephanie Yue have created one of the internet's premier showcases for game-related art and comics.

Though still in its early stages, Lifemeter grows daily with submissions from a dedicated group of indie artists from around the world, all sharing their takes on their favourite digital worlds. Thus far the submissions seem to rarely stray from the classic Nintendo pantheon, perhaps proving the 8bit system's influence on a generation of budding artists. But already the site shows a diverse range of reactions to the subject matter, from standard gag comics to Jose Garibaldi's silent telling of a Mario called to action and the princess he leaves behind.

Site:
Lifemeter Comics
URL:
www.lifemetercomics.com

OUT THERE



SPAM SPAM REVOLUTION

In an effort to give your feet a role in modern computing as much as your hands, researchers at Microsoft have developed the StepUI system for their upcoming TechFest. Using a standard *Dance Dance Revolution* pad, the team has prototyped StepMail, an email program which opens, closes and deletes emails by a flashy display of combo dance moves, and StepPhoto, a similarly operated image viewer and organiser.

Though the system is unlikely to see commercial release from Microsoft any time soon, internal trials have apparently gone favourably, with testers expressing their joy over jumping to delete messages.

An Irrational arrangement

Ken Levine's prickly independent studio has settled in with the Rockstars at Take 2. Is this a blow for independence or a boost for cult hits?

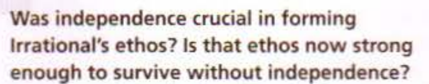


Irrational's co-founder and creative director Ken Levine believes that the future for today's developers is to stay super-small, or risk being bought out by big players

Boston-based (and Canberra, Australia-sistered) Irrational – developer of *System Shock 2*, *Freedom Force*, and surprising entries in the *Tribes* and *SWAT* series – has long flown the flag for independent development. Rumours that Take 2 had bought not only publishing rights for its anticipated pseudo-*Shock* follow-up *BioShock*, but also acquired Irrational with it, were confirmed in early January. We quizzed co-founder and creative director **Ken Levine** on the studio's past, present and future.

After spending a decade being directly responsible for your studio's survival, is it a strange feeling to have that responsibility lifted from you?

I've gone from having like three jobs to having 1.5 jobs. That means I can actually spend real time working on the games, as opposed to just writing the dialogue and kibbitizing on the design. I miss nothing, repeat, nothing about my old job. I'm happy just to be a full-time game designer again.



"Perhaps it's because I'm painfully awkward and nobody wants to talk to me. But whatever the reason, I don't think I've been forced to make a design or story change by a publisher"

Was independence crucial in forming Irrational's ethos? Is that ethos now strong enough to survive without independence?

When somebody else is writing the cheques, you're never fully independent. The only game we were truly one hundred percent independent for was *Freedom Force Vs The 3rd Reich*, as we paid for it with our very own shiny pennies.

That said, we've always been insanely lucky when it comes to making games: EA didn't bother us on *Shock 2* or the first *Freedom Force*, and Vivendi pretty much left us alone on the games we did for them. Perhaps it's because, socially, I'm painfully awkward and nobody wants to talk to me. But whatever the reason, I don't think I've ever been forced to make a design or story change by a publisher.

But several of your titles have suffered from publisher-developer friction – did it make you more wary of a binding relationship?

The friction was mostly about money. Money is the root of all evil. But it also lets you buy cool stuff and, you know, eat. For *Shock 2*, we were bummed out that EA didn't really seem to care about the game. We were also making a firstperson shooter in the wake of Columbine, and I was kind of grossed out by the fact that we had to pretend at E3 that we weren't making a firstperson shooter, when we were. I believe that videogames are a force for good, and I felt like the industry was ashamed of being itself.

What do you think has led to the current mistrust of publishers – the idea that buyouts signal the end of creative autonomy – rather than viewing it as a potentially beneficial relationship?

That really depends on the publisher. I'm not here to blow sunshine up anybody's butt, but Take 2's acquisitions have, in the past, always moved the developers forward. Whether it was the group that became Rockstar North, or the 2K sports



Newswire



UK advertisers silenced

Internet message boards may lambaste the deceptions of the game industry, but the power of letters to people of influence is incomparable. Complaints to the UK Advertising Standards Authority in February righted two wrongs, the result of which could have serious ramifications for games marketing. Three complaints were upheld against TV adverts for Activision's *Call Of Duty* titles that featured mocked-up CG footage. It then took just one complaint for a print ad for Konami's *Crime Life* (five heavily-armed black men with the slogan 'Rule the streets or fall by the wayside') to see it ruled unsuitable for further publication.





Levine believes that fans of Irrational titles like *FFVT3R* (main) and *Tribes: Vengeance* (right) trust the company to make the best game it can, regardless of the platform

guys, or even the guys doing *Bully*. That last studio also used to be published by Crave – a game called *Global Ops*. They were nice guys, but didn't get the funding, or attention, they deserved until they were acquired.

Could you have seen Irrational surviving the next-generation technology arms race without a publisher's permanent support?

Frankly, who the hell knows? Just as we were closing the deal with Take 2, I saw lots of guys our size start to disappear. I think the future will be dominated by the super-big and the super-small – it's the ones in the middle who will be looking like the guy in the sad clown painting.

The announcement that *BioShock* will also be released on 360 has raised the hackles of many PC gamers, despite the fact that Irrational has always been platform-agnostic.



Freedom Force Vs The 3rd Reich is the only game Irrational has developed independent of any outside financial involvement

How are you approaching that situation?

Like we approach every game: we make the best game we can, and we make the game right for the platform we're on. I'm not going to make a pile of promises here – after ten years doing this, I think there are gamers who trust us, and it's our job to earn that trust with each new release. Unlike politics, people can really vote with their wallets.

Do you think that EA is playing dog-in-the-manger with its sudden re-trademarking of *System Shock*, or do you share our unlikely hopes for a Doug Church/Steven Spielberg production?

I don't try to figure out what big companies like EA are doing. I can't even figure out what's going on in the next room. But would I love to play another Doug Church game? Don't even ask such a silly question.

Is Irrational's new-found financial security kickstarting larger-scale projects, or are you still pacing yourselves?

Here's a good story: I was talking to my pal Greg Gobbi, director of development at 2K, about his work at Ubisoft on *Rainbow Six*. Irrational had just finished *SWAT 4*, and I was telling him we did *SWAT 4* with a 25-person team. I asked him how many people were on *Rainbow Six*. He said: "18." Now, the guy's got a bit of a French accent, so I wanted to make sure I understood him, so I said: "18?!" And he said: "No. *Eighty*."

So we're used to doing more with less. But Take 2 has doubled the *BioShock* team since the acquisition to about 50 people now – that's still a relatively small team compared to the stories you hear about the 200-person teams. But I like knowing the name of everybody I'm working with. I'm funny that way.

OUT THERE



LA TAKEDOWN

As if the impression of an investment shambles was not an adequate epitaph for Gizmondo (its European division having been recently placed into liquidation by a UK court), former executive Stefan Eriksson left gamers, car enthusiasts and Los Angeles patrolmen the lasting image of a rare $1 million Ferrari Enzo scattered in pieces across the Pacific Coast Highway on the night of February 20.

No one was injured, even though the car was believed by police officials to have exceeded 160mph before the crash. Eriksson was discovered to have a blood-alcohol level slightly above the legal limit, but was not arrested as he claimed that an as-yet-unseen man named 'Dietrich' – who fled the scene – was driving.

Further allegations that a gun magazine was discovered at the scene and that the vehicle was stolen are being investigated.

At the time of going to press, no charges had been made against Eriksson.

SOUND BYTES

"The Gizmondo is the most powerful entertainment handheld in the world and we have three to give away!"
The News Of The World's **Sunday** magazine maintains faith in the handheld on its weekly competition page

"Nintendo… You've got to give it to them. They march to the beat of a different drummer. Sometimes that makes them incredibly right and sometimes that makes them incredibly wrong… Holding two different things like that? Anyway…"
Microsoft chairman **Bill Gates** offers the Revolution controller his faintest praise

"I eat kittens for breakfast too."
Geometry Wars creator **Stephen Cakebread** answers the question: do you hate gamers?

"How many times are you going to give me the 16th iteration of… I'm not even going to talk about the other products."
Midway chairman **David Zucker** offers a surprising reason for the cancellation of Snoop Dogg's game, *Fear And Respect*

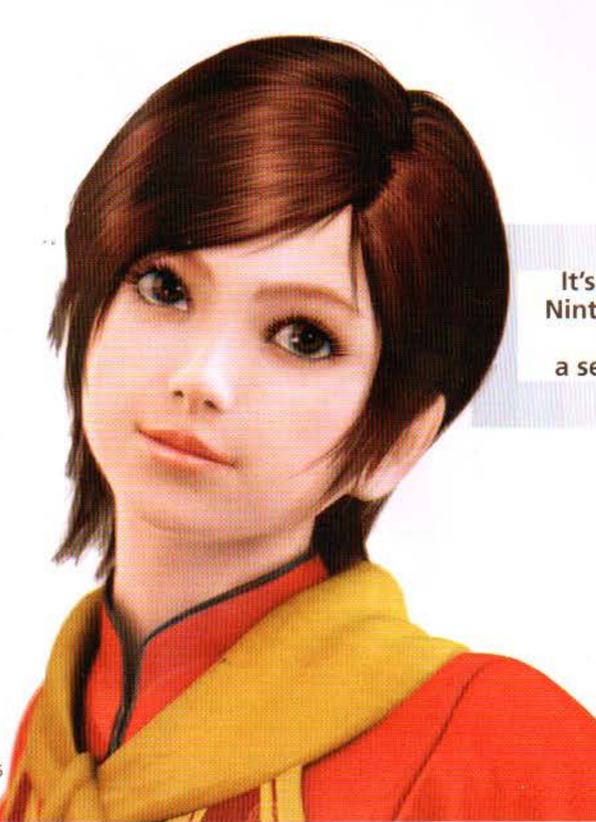


Awaiting new players…

Japan's arcade scene reaches out to female gamers, both young and old, with touchscreen tech, card-based gaming, and merchandise galore

Japan's AOU (Amusement Operators Union) show, held this year at Makuhari Messe, Chiba, on February 17, used to be the event where you turned up to see the future of videogames, but this year it was a place where you got to see them being left behind. Major manufacturers look more concerned with amusements than with traditional arcade games, with the focus on integration into the high street rather than trying to outshine the entertainment experience offered by increasingly tech-rich home consoles and the increasingly ubiquitous mobile market. Because of this, it was the unique strengths of the dedicated amusement parlour machines that looked strongest at the event: pachinko and pachislot games continue to sell the dream of quick-cash wins, something as instantly attractive as it is lastingly compulsive, and are both performing well. Meanwhile the purikura ('print club' photo booths) segment continues to decline, but UFO catchers are booming by targeting users in their 30s and 40s via products bearing popular licences from the '50s through to the '80s.

It's clear that Sega has been looking over Nintendo's shoulder. Inspired by the stylus interface of the DS, Touch De Zuno is a series of minigames using a pointy stick



Of all the traditional gaming companies, Sega is grasping the amusement market most fiercely and attempting to pull in female players. As well as producing a follow-up to its all-conquering *Mushiking* (which arrives just in time to combat the fatigue that's beginning to hit the original), the company has been developing its *Love & Berry* brand. Aimed at schoolgirls, this card-based collection of minigames allows players to win fashionable items to customise their avatar, and has been hugely successful – so much so that Sega is now riding that popularity into the world of real fashion. Mimicking Nintendo's Pokémon Centres, Sega is preparing a number of official shops for the franchise, and the arrival of a dedicated TV series is also rumoured. With girls spending more than boys – since they browse with their mothers in tow, and with both inclined to spend more – the appearance of a clothes range is one that's likely to reap some huge commercial rewards, and orders are already piling up for *Love & Berry* products.

It's also clear that Sega has been looking over Nintendo's shoulder. Inspired by the stylus interface of the DS, *Touch De Zuno* is a series of minigames based on the use of a pointy stick on a large screen. As formulaic as it sounds, it's believed that more of these DS-inspired titles are due in the coming months. Indeed, in cooperation with one local English-learning school, Konami displayed a language quiz game that was a barely veiled clone of the best-selling *Otona no DS Training: Eigo Zuke*. It's clear that the arcade sector isn't blind to the





Sega's biggest game of the show was clearly *Virtua Fighter 5*, which attracted visitors with its super-smooth animation, impressive character facial detail, and slick, stylish cabinet design

Sega's *Touch De Zuno*, with its oversized 'wand' controllers, is clearly inspired by Nintendo's DS. The game's collection of simplistic minigames should ensure that it attracts a broad range of arcade-goers





Konami appeared intent on reviving its music games, exhuming its entire catalogue based on the rising popularity of *DDR* in the US. Meanwhile Taito's *Half-Life 2: Survivor* (top) drew interest thanks to its interesting cabinet. Too bad its visuals are hardly cutting edge

huge impact of Nintendo's handheld, and the new markets it has opened up.

Traditional gaming still made a stand, mostly with *Virtua Fighter 5*, which was the biggest game of the show due to *Afterburner Climax's* absence.

The performance of Sega's arcade division has been a great source of financial stability in recent years, and the future looks no different. A special version of *The House Of The Dead 4* drew crowds, while *Virtua Striker 4* should do good business around the World Cup. The company's big, expensive network games have proved profitable, and should only perform better as manufacturing costs come down. Combined with Sega's early lead in the 'kids' arcade, the company expects to post a new high in earnings at the end of the fiscal year.

By contrast, Namco remains focused mainly on UFO catchers, but still had space to put *Mario Kart Arcade* on display once again; already released in Japan, it has proven to be a solid draw. Its biggest traditional gaming offering came in the form of *Time Crisis 4* (see last month's ATEI report).

Taito, meanwhile, presented a revamped iteration of its Type-X arcade technology, along with *Shikigami No Shiro III*. More surprisingly, it unveiled a joint project with Capcom entitled *War Of The Grail*. While few details have been revealed, an early video points to a realtime card-based game in line with Sega's *Sangokushi Senki*.

Throughout all this, Taito was holding its ground in the face of a legal offensive from Sega levelled at its clones of *Mushiking*. Banpresto was also active in the card-game market, displaying a second version of *Data Carddass* that uses the Dragonball licence – arcade operators have confirmed that this game is currently doing well alongside Sega's own. A similar cabinet using the



Vertical shooter *Pink Sweets* is Cave's follow-up to *Ibara*. Of its two buttons, one allows the player to alternate between a shield or projectile fire, while the other controls drones

Tamagotchi IP was also in attendance, specifically designed to appeal to girls, and to tap into the success of the DS's *Tamagotchi Corner Shop*, which has sold nearly a million copies in Japan. One final addition to the kids' arcade arena came from Capcom, which debuted *Rockman EXE Battle Chip Stadium*, developed in cooperation with Takara Tomy. Again, it's hoped that it'll create a lucrative relationship between the GBA game, toys and the arcade; operators certainly seemed to like it.

Even with the marginalisation of traditional games, there was an unmistakable air of optimism at this year's AOU, even if it's one laced with exploitation and opportunism. Still, the arcade is successfully reconfiguring itself for a healthier future – albeit one that's rife with copycats. In essence it confirms that while the arcade is no longer marked for extinction, it hasn't *really* changed its spots.



Card captor

Japanese arcade owners push for standard card payments

One key element in the modern Japanese arcade is the standardisation of payment through cards instead of coins. Arcade owners are pushing this solution as it greatly lowers their operating costs, offsetting any initial inconvenience that such a move makes. The industry has chosen the EDY card, which is developed by Sony, but the trend in society is in favour of the SUICA card, created by JR (Japan Railways). It was initially used to pay for travel, and is now used for a wide range of payments. Sega and other pivotal companies have included SUICA card support as an option in their cabinets, allowing the development of a system adapted for each card format. This also allows the operators to make their own choice, and has become a welcome integration in the eyes of those working in the business.



Dave Perry (below) has already made a his departure from Shiny, claiming it's the best way to help the studio in the long run. Meanwhile, Atari chairman Bruno Bonnell (bottom) is putting his hopes in games like the upcoming *TimeShift* (left)

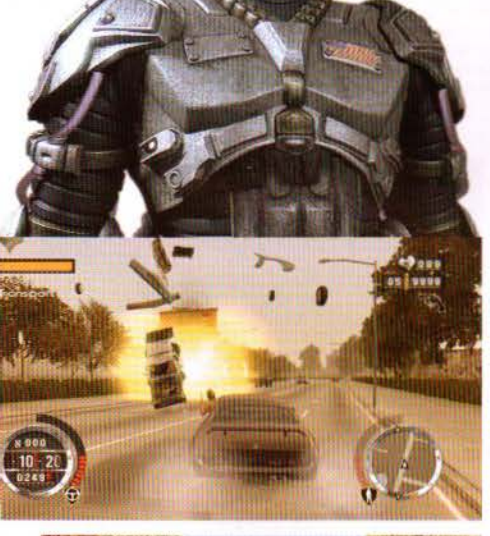






Industry downturn shakes up Atari

The pattern of resignations, litigations and lay-offs spreads to mid-sized publishing



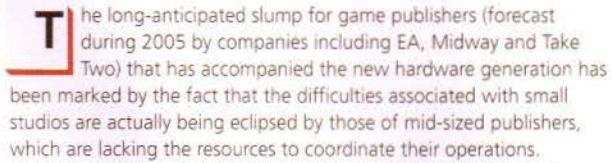




For all that Atari is currently feeling the pinch, its product roster is healthy enough. *Driver: Parallel Lines* (reviewed on p84) is a return to form for the series, while *Test Drive Unlimited* and a new *Alone In The Dark* are both credible, ambitious 360 projects

The long-anticipated slump for game publishers (forecast during 2005 by companies including EA, Midway and Take Two) that has accompanied the new hardware generation has been marked by the fact that the difficulties associated with small studios are actually being eclipsed by those of mid-sized publishers, which are lacking the resources to coordinate their operations.

This month saw Atari fall foul, with chairman Bruno Bonnell's announcement of a corporate action plan that's designed to restructure its workforce and stabilise expenditure. An expected 20 per cent staff reduction and sell-off of the company's internal studios manifested itself almost immediately with the resignation of Shiny



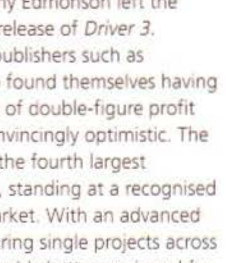
Atari also revealed that Reflections founder Martin Edmonson had received a substantial payout as settlement for an unfair dismissal claim filed in March 2005

Entertainment president David Perry, his stated reason being that the facilitation of the studio's sale would be more easily achieved as a buyer than as an Atari employee.

Other houses included in the planned sell-off are Newcastle-based Reflections (just free of development duties on *Driver: Parallel Lines*, reviewed this month), Dallas-based Paradigm (working on the newly announced *Stuntman 2* and hotly anticipated remake of *Battlezone*), French studio Eden (working on promising 360 titles *Test Drive Unlimited* and *Alone In The Dark: Near Death Investigation*) and Australian developer Melbourne House, said to be at work on PS2/Xbox *Test Drive* titles. Bonnell has stated that Atari's focus will shift to the efforts of external studios in future, a worrying forecast when you consider that the aforementioned titles are arguably the strongest the company has seen for some time.

Atari's vague acknowledgement of Melbourne House is particularly symptomatic of its aforementioned management issues. Having developed 2004's *Transformers* (8/10, **E**136), the company has essentially disappeared behind a website that hasn't been updated since. If such valuable resources are being squandered, it's little wonder that Atari has found itself on the road to financial crisis.

A further widespread trend that's worsened the company's position has been litigation – something the last year has seen more than its share of. In a filing detailing the $300,000 settlement of the long-running American Video Graphics patent lawsuit (a controversial claim that essentially made the entire modern 3D gaming industry liable for technology theft), Atari also revealed that Reflections founder Martin Edmonson had received a substantial payout as settlement for an unfair dismissal claim filed in March 2005. As well as the issuance of shares valued at $2.1m, it was ruled that Edmonson should be given staggered cash payments totalling $2.6m. The filing offered no insights into precisely why Edmonson left the company following the release of *Driver 3*.



Though large-scale publishers such as Electronic Arts have also found themselves having to restructure as a result of double-figure profit loss, Ubisoft remains convincingly optimistic. The publisher ranks itself as the fourth largest independent worldwide, standing at a recognised fifth on the US stock market. With an advanced management model sharing single projects across multiple studios, it's arguably better equipped for not only the transition period but also beyond. It'll be interesting to see if others begin to follow its example.



Wanted: the best

For the right people, two new opportunities present the chance to shape **Edge**'s future, online and off

Ever wanted to work on the magazine you're reading? Now may be your chance, because **Edge** is currently looking to recruit a writer and an online editor in order to help build on its continued success.

To be considered for the writing position you must be able to demonstrate superior journalism skills (if not necessarily published experience), and a strong knowledge of the videogame industry. Your application will require a CV, writing samples that demonstrate your ability, and a 500-word article on the following topic: 'What is Japan's most important contribution to videogaming?'

Prospective online editors must be able to demonstrate experience in a web-coding environment and also possess top-tier editorial skills. Your application will require a CV, samples of your written work, and a brief proposal (no more than 750 words) outlining how you believe **Edge Online** could be taken to the next stage in its development.

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Continue

DS Lite
Nintendo's product design department: back on top

Mudslob Cankerbed
EA's auto-generated logins continue to make us smile

Reflections
Perhaps it should've been called *Driver: Redemption*

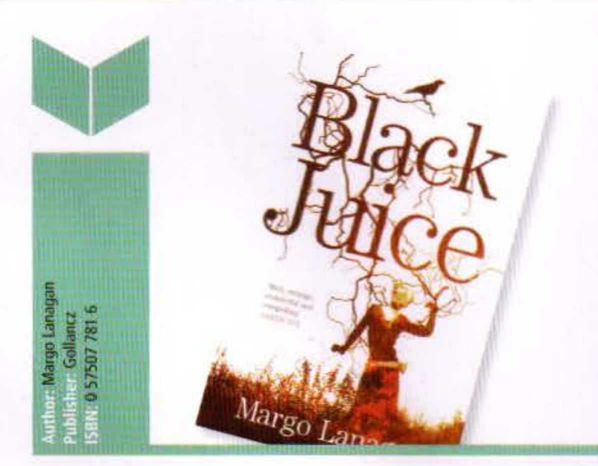
Quit



Crude HDR lighting
It's everywhere. And it's growing. Shield your eyes

The pain of transition
And so another generation turns over in a bit of a mess

Blue
The only DS hue going if you don't like things white



BLACK JUICE

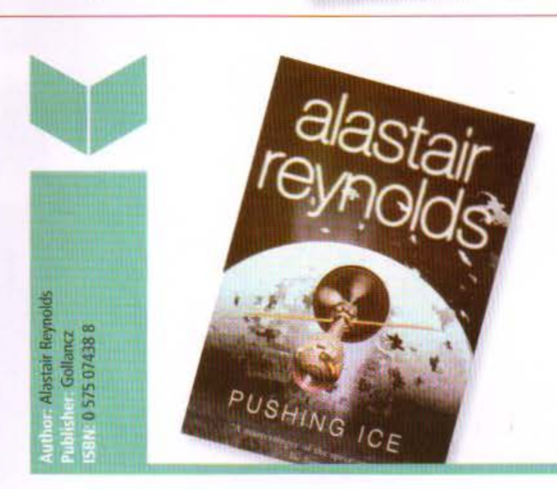
Magic realism merges its hard and humorous edges in this dreamy selection of vignettes

A collection of 11 short, twisted stories, *Black Juice* seems to float in a strange void between adolescent and adult fiction. Each comes with its own dreamy veneer, as the wisdom of children and the wisdom of the old merges with magical visions of angels and spirits. There's often a puzzle or riddle intertwined with the stories, as if Lanagan has deliberately, or otherwise, left out a crucial word or description – a gap only finally filled with the tale's denouement.

But if there's a mischievous and humorous streak running through *Black Juice*, there are odd moments of sheer bile, too: the slow distribution of tar pit justice in the opening story, 'Singing My Sister Down', or the social exclusion of a girl who tries to save her people from disaster only to be ignored in 'Yowlinin'.

The result is a collection heady with emotion and atmosphere. Yet despite her undoubted craft (Lanagan has won several literary awards in her native Australia), there's also an impression of slightness in the style. With every surreal sketch of a clown-killing sniper choosing victims like sweets from a variety box, or a bride late for her ceremony after two years of Bride School, it becomes harder to see how the atmosphere could be sustained in a full-length book.

So, like the chocolate bar of certain starry constellation, *Black Juice* is tasty, but it won't satisfy your appetite for something more substantial.



PUSHING ICE

Holding together a community light-years from home is no simple task, especially with malicious enemies within and without

One of the trickiest elements for the aspiring sci-fi writer to present to their readers is the relativistic effects of velocity and time. The faster you travel, the slower time passes compared to those who aren't moving. But it's a great narrative device if you can get it right.

As the miners in Pushing Ice accelerate through the solar system in the wake of one of Saturn's moons, which has turned into a spaceship, their chances of ever returning to their own time and place diminish.

The slow acceptance of this loss is at the heart of Alastair Reynold's latest book. Of course, there is inscrutable alien technology, mysterious visitors from the future, and all manner of inter-species negotiations, double-crossing and even outright warfare. But as the workers of the Rockhopper try to deal with being thousands of light-years from home, the themes underpinning the novel are political and historical.

Pushing Ice is an excellent stage on which to investigate more rounded characters. The Rockhopper's captain, Bella Lind, and erstwhile friend and chief engineer, Svetlana Barseghian, both believe they're working for the common good, but find themselves with opposing views. Power shifts between them until an extreme threat forces a reconciliation. It's not what you'd expect from someone whose *Revelation Space* trilogy is classic of dramatic space action, but Reynolds has a firm grasp of the wider opportunities of the genre.

INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Power Stone Collection

FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



Unveiled at Capcom's recent Vegas press event, this is a welcome concept for PSP/Dreamcast conversions. The stretching of its visuals to 16:9 is something this medley could do without, though

Mother 3

FORMAT: GBA **PUBLISHER:** NINTENDO



While Shigesato Itoi fights his self-professed urge to go back and deepen its 'completely written' story, the long-awaited game to end them all commences its painstakingly cautious final approach

Kingdom Under Fire: Circle Of Doom

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** TBA



Not a true sequel but a convincing brand extension, Blueside's randomly generated dungeon brawl is sure to give the rendering power of 360 a test, if only in terms of wanton online carnage

Osawari Tantei Ozawa Rina

FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** SUCCESS



Answering the call for more touch-driven adventures on DS, this ghostly beauty follows a familiar scheme of top-screen dialogue and touchscreen control, but originality clearly abounds within

Superman Returns

FORMAT: 360, PS2, PS3 (TBC), XBOX **PUBLISHER:** EA



Much of this game is said to already exist, suggesting Tiburon to be on course for prompt delivery of a game largely unseen. The engine held promise at X05; hopefully the content will back it up

Okami

FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



Producer Atsushi Inaba suggests April for Japan but remains sketchy about release elsewhere. Capcom is prepared to wait for a quality localisation, and additional content may also feature

Dead Rising

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



More good news from Vegas: Inafune's rotting rampage is taking shape and addressing its early issues. All that shopping-mall chow has given hero Frank West smoother looks and slicker movement

Stranglehold

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** MIDWAY



Though sandwiched between John Woo's scant repertoire and *Max Payne's* lurching combat model, the *Psi-Ops* team's shooter seems determined to make the most of its limited potential

Tekken: Dark Resurrection

FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** NAMCO



Namco's reputation for generosity should hold firm on UMD, the arcade update and now handheld port offering more immediate play modes, alongside wireless bouts and bonus costume parts



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Warbears

www.gamegarage.co.uk/play/warbears/

As linear and restrictive as it is charming, creator Gionatan Iasio's *Warbears* is a point'n'click puzzler that has all of the adorable mini-fig characters and narrative drive we saw in *Samorost*, but the 'one way to win, many ways to lose' mentality of *Hapland*.

The story of an elite squadron of special-ops bears in their effort to bust a bank heist and hostage crisis, the game requires the player to work their way through a highly complicated and multi-faceted scenario by thinking through situation-based puzzles. One false move or out-of-sequence step can bungle the entire operation and force a frustrating restart, but, indeed, part of *Warbears*' appeal is in the tension such an approach engenders (though Iasio has said some leniency and balance may be added shortly).

Humorous and full of unlockable bonuses for the obsessive and perfectionist player, upon its appearance *Warbears* instantly gathered a vocal community of fans, which we can only hope will quickly drive the creation of a sequel.



Western-developed games like *Kameo*, *PGR3* and *Elder Scrolls* have failed to capture the Japanese imagination. Will the arrival of the Korean-developed *Ninety-Nine Nights* strike a better chord?

Unstoppable DS

Koji Aizawa, editor in chief of Famitsu PS2, shares the Japanese DS obsession

So what was the big news in the Japanese industry at the end of last year? You might think it was the launch of the first next-gen console, the Xbox 360. But it wasn't. Or maybe a big local hit like *Kingdom Hearts II*, which sold a million copies in no time at all. Not that, either. The big Christmas hit was still – still! – the Nintendo DS.

The figures speak for themselves. Between the end of 2005 and the beginning of 2006, Nintendo sold two million units of its portable. It was so popular that there was a constant shortage of the machine in January. So now Nintendo has sold a total of six million DSes, which allowed its CEO, **Satoru Iwata**, to say: "The DS is the fastest-selling platform ever released in the Japanese videogame industry's history." He also added that "no other hardware has produced million-seller titles in less than a year of existence." Again, the figures confirm that. Both *Animal Crossing: Wild World* and *Mario Kart DS* have sold over or close to two million copies. Now, these were already popular series, so I can understand their success. But in cases like *Nintendogs* or *Brain Training*, I'm really surprised. I mean, here are totally new titles which are not focused on being a technical tour de force (to say the least), and yet they sold more than a million! I'm pretty much sure that, like me, no one else in the industry ever thought these games would do so well.

Moreover, *Daredemo Asobi Taikai*, which is a group of trump games, and *Otona No DS Training Eigo*, which is basically an English-learning application, have both sold more than half a million copies. From an industry point of view, this is totally unprecedented. In the past, many of these edutainment 'games' were released but they always sold between 10,000 and 20,000 copies, no more.

OK, so you could explain this success by the portable nature of the DS and its pen interface, but I can't believe this can account for such a drastic change in the popularity of this kind of 'game'. So what does? There is no need to search far: this is Nintendo's knowhow hard at work. It's probably the only company which has a strong enough reputation to try this kind of revolution, and the only brand strong enough to pull people in.

This is Nintendo's knowhow hard at work. It's probably the only company which has a strong enough reputation to try this kind of revolution, and the only brand strong enough to pull people in

And there's more to it than that. *Brain Training*, which will be released in the US and Europe this spring, is based on a popular book written by a professor at a famous Japanese university, and so the success of the game can be partly be explained by a promotional campaign which tapped in to the fame of the book very effectively. The success of this game is not a question of chance but the result of a very carefully planned marketing strategy.

And then there is Microsoft. Today, the Xbox



The great thing about having a killer app like *Brain Training* which can only be played for ten minutes a day is that it ups the demand for other software: no doubt this effect helped *Animal Crossing: Wild World* on its way to over a million sales

360 has sold only around 100,000 units in Japan. It's sad that this makes the Japanese market such a special case and I guess people in the US or Europe may have difficulty in understanding why our market works like this. But the reasons behind the failure of Xbox 360 and the huge success of the DS here are the same. Nintendo is a strong brand, with strong connections to Japanese culture, which markets its games well. Microsoft is a less popular brand, which tries to bring its own culture to Japan, and it's clear to see its marketing hasn't been so effective.

So is there any hope for 360? Will the DS run out of steam? Will people start looking for something new? Well, I'm writing this column before the release of the DS Lite, and I'm unable to preorder one. Demand is so high that Nintendo has a hard time producing enough of the standard DS, so no one thinks there will be enough Lites to go around. Stores won't even take preorders because they don't know if they will be able to honour them. So I'm pretty sure the DS boom is not about to fade away. See you!

The DS has made a success out of the previously marginal 'edutainment' genre. Aizawa argues that it's not the stylus that has made the difference – it's the Nintendo brand, a good choice of licence and well-targeted marketing that has sold *Brain Training* to Japan's non-gamers. With the arrival of DS Lite, that success will only grow further

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Dead Rising



Making good its shuffle from lame prototype towards bounding beta, Inafune's supermarket sweep-and-clear operation looks as if it might achieve both laughs and longevity.
360, CAPCOM

Sam & Max 2



With much of the original *Freelance Police* team said to be involved, we can only hope that this episodic return resembles Purcell's current webcomic rather than *Bone*'s 3D.
PC, TELLTALE GAMES

Yakuza



It was bewitching enough in Japanese, so the prospect of a full – and hopefully sensitive – English translation makes us want to bash bicycles over people's heads in joy.
PS2, SEGA

Monkey magic

Sometimes the first time isn't the best time



Black & White 2 is one of the worst recent culprits of Over-Protective Tutorial Syndrome. Some would have actually paid extra to avoid it

What's the greatest luxury in videogaming? A 65-inch, 1,080p plasma screen? A complete DVD archive of every MAME ROM in existence, cleared by some all-powerful legal force for your personal use? A piece of paper with Miyamoto's mobile number on it? A state-of-the-art dev studio with 100 world-class employees and unlimited funds, ready to make a game catering to your every whim?

No. The greatest gaming luxury would be a trained monkey whose sole purpose is to play through the first two hours (or the first five hours if it's an RPG) of any game you fancied, to guarantee you'd never have to plod through the tutorials and training missions, the having-all-your-abilities-before-they're-mysteriously-removed and the being-made-to-kill-20-rats-just-to-prove-you-know-where-the-X-button-is. Imagine it: that game shop euphamism 'pre-played' would actually mean pre-played. No more rooms with four chests in them, one on a low block, one on a high block, one across a short jump, one across a high jump. No more doors promising adventure barred by a cross-armed NPC who thinks it would be wiser if you spoke to the village elder before going 'this way'. Just getting to do what you came here to do.

In the last few years games have made serious steps forward in recognising that their players aren't necessarily veterans – or that maybe they're veterans who like their hands held. Tutorials are integrated, interactive, sometimes even adaptive. Learning curves are gentle, initial challenges artificially easy. All to the good if gaming is going to grow.

But what about those who *are* veterans? Who know the cues, who have the skills, who can read a game landscape as smartly as a laser reads a disc? Can't they be catered for, so that sitting down with a new game doesn't produce a sigh of disappointment as you anticipate an evening of hobbled baby steps? Maybe every game could take a leaf from Kojima's book and open with a question that separates the sheepish from the stubborn: 'This is my first videogame'/'I like freedom more'/'I like security more'. Or perhaps 360 could integrate it into your profile (GamerPsyche: Bloodyminded, Obedient or Rebellious). Just think what we'd be saving those monkeys from.

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW**

EverQuest II: Kingdom Of Sky

Can the grandaddy of the modern MMORPG rejuvenate itself enough to keep up with the whippersnappers it sired?



The tattered remains of the Plane of Sky that've slipped into this realm are undoubtedly some of the prettiest and most vertigo-inducing scenery the game has produced thus far







More than any other segment of the industry, MMORPG developers have the thinnest rope to walk in attempting to continually craft and advance their creations. A constantly treacherous balance of veteran appeasement and newcomer enticement, it's been an especially difficult struggle for Sony Online Entertainment which, coming off the successes of being practically the only game in town with the groundbreaking *EverQuest*, has had to continually retool its thinking in light of fresh competition. Contrary to the massive overhaul and upheaval of its *Star Wars Galaxies*, SOE's progress on *EverQuest II* has been markedly more measured, slowly tweaking and learning from both its competitors and community throughout the past year, and delivering a steady stream of updates that by all accounts have grown the game in the right direction. With its second expansion, *Kingdom Of Sky*, SOE hopes to push that good fortune further, giving its eldest players new worlds to explore, and the subscriber base in general a sense of uniqueness and personality to set one apart from the others.

On its surface, it's clear that one of the primary goals of the *Sky* expansion is to restore a fresh sense of the wonder of exploration to Norrath, which for many took a number of steps too far towards graphical realism in the sequel. According to in-game lore, the kingdom consists of floating islands and ancient inhabitants that have been leaking from the now unstable Plane of Sky, the parallel plane designed as a top-level raid zone from *EverQuest*. The otherworldly origins of the realm have given SOE artists freer reign to give the area an aesthetic overhaul evident in the shattered islands that make up the kingdom, and in the much broader palette of pervasive purples and oranges which tinge the zone. It's also given the designers a chance to bring more vertical thinking to world design, giving adventurers more freedom to explore the world acrobatically, scaling cliffs or taking hundred-foot nosedives over waterfalls – or indeed the isles themselves – to discover new zones within the world.

But the expansion isn't simply cosmetic, nor is it meant exclusively for level-capped players in need of fresh content. Arguably, the broadest and most important addition with *Kingdom Of Sky* is its new achievement system, which will affect players not just as they progress through the new realm, but across the board for everyone beyond level 20. A novel way to both encourage engagement with the world and to give players a chance to distinguish themselves from others of their same race and class, the achievement system exists outside the standard experience system and awards special points to those that take on extra heroic challenges. These duties can range from confronting notorious enemies to discovering rare treasures, but in general emphasise exploration of the world of Norrath above and beyond what traditional power-levelling play might require. These achievement points are spent expanding abilities in a class-based achievement tree, giving not only a standard mathematical set of critical-hit increases and spell

The broadest and most important addition with Kingdom Of Sky is its new achievement system, which will affect players across the board beyond level 20



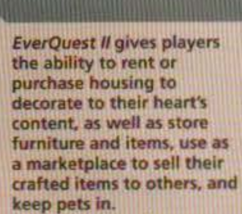


The entrance to Tenebrous Tangle, the first zone, is notable for its hundred-foot jump to the waters below. A thrill, but also a clever measure of readiness for what's beyond. Survive, and it's likely safe to continue





One of the expansion's new creatures, the realm dragons have created a species of half-bred dragons, the Droag, to do their bidding and protect their inner sanctums



My space

EverQuest II gives players the ability to rent or purchase housing to decorate to their heart's content, as well as store furniture and items, use as a marketplace to sell their crafted items to others, and keep pets in.

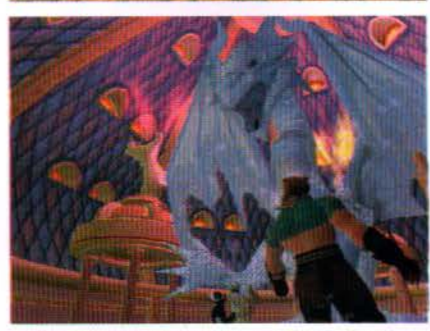
As a bonus, those who purchase the *Kingdom Of Sky* expansion receive this ambulatory, and carnivorous, pet plant for their house, which rewards its green-fingered owners with potions when fed any number of edible items.

extensions but visible skills to distinguish a player from others of the same training.

All of these changes are part of SOE's attempt to bring more life and lore to a world that's been seen as clinging too heavily to loot procurement over story advancement. To that end, *Kingdom Of Sky* is also set to expand its 'signature' and 'heritage' quests. The former are one-shot quests that deal with the overarching narrative of Norrath, giving adventurers an increased sense of their role in the world, while the latter deal with subjects that cement stronger ties between the Norrath of now to the Norrath of the first *EverQuest*, some 500 years in the past. Apart from imparting background information on the world they inhabit, the heritage quests also bring back popular items from the original as rewards.

Still, it's debatable whether this new content will be enough to pull throngs of MMO players away from their current engagements or capture the attentions of new players who have yet to experience what Norrath has offered for years. Instead, SOE seems to be content to play the safer route with *Kingdom Of Sky* in cultivating its established fanbase and ensuring that their alliance remains strongly with the game. And with the ever-increasingly diverse and competitive MMO market, and the potential for backlash with more sweeping change, that might be the wisest move Sony could make.





As the remnants of the ancient Plane of Sky, the kingdom is home to some of Norrath's oldest creatures, including a set of dragons that have taken roost in the bowels of the Bonemire, the deepest of *Kingdom Of Sky*'s realms

It wouldn't be a Kingdom of Sky without appropriately winged creatures. The Barren Sky realm is home to the Aviaks, Vultaks and Hooluks, modelled on eagles, vultures and owls, each with varying affinities to strangers



FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX, PC**
PUBLISHER: **EMPIRE INTERACTIVE**
DEVELOPER: **BUGBEAR**
ORIGIN: **FINLAND**
RELEASE: **MAY**

FlatOut 2

Destructive racing minus any attitude makes a welcome return. We're just not so sure the ragdoll drivers feel the same



While your opponents look realistic, they're a far cry from the conceited poseurs of *Need for Speed: Most Wanted*. It's *Road Rash* they're reminiscent of: plain-looking people you'll hold personal vendettas against





The most popular aspect of *FlatOut* – online play – will return for all three formats, allowing *FlatOut 2's* physics engine to be stretched in a way solo play can't match. However, ragdoll stunt events can also be experienced online in the sequel



FlatOut wasn't the kind of game that Bugbear was used to making. "*FlatOut* was our third game and our first console and multiplatform title. It was a huge learning experience for the whole company and it's safe to say the game that we shipped bears only some resemblance to what we set out to do at the end of 2002, when the first concepts of *FlatOut* were drafted," explains business development director **Jussi Laakkonen**.

With that in mind, *FlatOut 2* is an MOT, a tune-up for *FlatOut* that involves some fresh oil, a good polish and an upgraded engine. For example, its tracks can now host up to 5,000 dynamic, destructible objects per track, a 66 per cent increase on the original. Which is important because *FlatOut 2*'s chaos is more reactive than something like *Full Auto*'s omnipresent destruction, because its props aren't so much destroyed as redistributed. Structures crumple and wooden fences shatter – but the debris doesn't vanish, instead it scatters across the track making a mighty mess, with even the most innocuous piece of flotsam proving to be a serious troublemaker when it passes under the wheels of a fast-moving car.

Such an upgrade is clearly tangible. Instead of the tracks feeling like linear corridors of interactive clutter, races now branch off and criss-cross through large areas hosting more tumbling junk than most spare bedrooms – ripe for causing spillages and building makeshift roadblocks and ramps, as well as perhaps earning an occasional Darwin award. Unbelievably, explosions are new for *FlatOut 2*, and there is a lot to blow up. Even landslides can be triggered by chain reaction.

However the engine performs, the handling of *FlatOut*'s cars was always something of an issue, with no true sensation of control in its power slides. This must have been addressed for *FlatOut 2*, surely? Laakkonen says: "The game features three primary handling models: the four-wheel drive, the rear-wheel drive and the front-wheel drive. Each of the three classes of cars [derby, race and street] contain variants for each handling model, which are then further varied between the different cars by their mass, acceleration and responsiveness. It means that players can better tailor their cars for maximum grip, or otherwise."

Opponents behave well, too, in terms of their fallibility. Their vehicles aren't superglued to a prescribed line you can't shift them from: even the slightest nudge can cause them to twitch, spin off and perform an emergency stop with the help



LA's storm drains (above left) offer incredible speed for those with full tanks of boost, at the risk of painful crashes. LA's other stage, Downtown, results in a street race where players can drive over building roofs



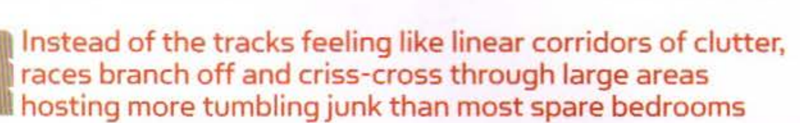


To emphasise its destructive leaning, post-race awards are handed out for five categories of collision: Whammo, Powerhit, Super Flip, Blast Out, Ragdolled and Wrecked. Early on, the cash prize isn't so much a bonus as essential savings for upgrades

of a nearby tree. At the preview code stage, though, the game's difficulty remains reminiscent of the original: a surprisingly tough ride, where the player has to bottom feed throughout the initial races in order to scrape together enough cash to buy the upgrades that'll allow for a comfortable medal position.

But there was one area where *FlatOut* was never in doubt – its grisly and hilarious Ragdoll Olympics. It saw the vehicle's driver purposefully flung from the vehicle at a high jump, or a giant dartboard. "The ragdoll events were really well received by gamers," says Laakkonen. "The anarchic, toon-style stunts really had a lot of players laughing out loud." So, in line with sequel logic, the number of events has been doubled, making a total of 12, including rings of fire, curling, ski jumping and stoneskipping. The events are self-explanatory, and all work around the same idea – ejecting your driver through the windscreen at the perfect angle to give the desired results. Since they're all centred on this same premise, Bugbear has included a unique scoring system for each event to help them feel more varied. Most welcome, though, is the inclusion of aftertouch, allowing players to steer their floppy avatars as they sail gracelessly through the air, a feature that's been given its own name – aerobatics. A one-use nudge move is also available to give the driver one final fillip and allow for a more accurate landing spot to be chosen.

So, *FlatOut 2* feels like a firmly footed sequel, but how does Bugbear feel about the quickening competition in the driving game market, one that always seems to be on the verge of gridlock? It doesn't appear to have been touched by the hand of *Burnout*, at least. "Competition is important, but we don't stay up all night worrying about it, as *FlatOut* is its own type of a game. It's neither shallow nor overtly serious. It doesn't belittle the player and hide the complexities of racing, but at the same time it doesn't require you to hammer the same lap time after time. *FlatOut* is all about going fast and having a blast. We think that *FlatOut 2* delivers a punch you just can't dodge."

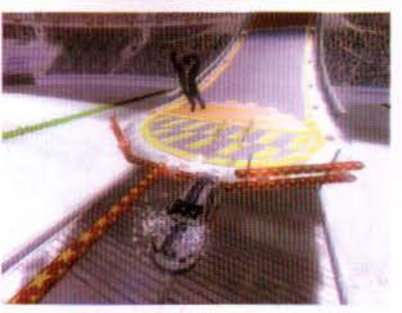


Instead of the tracks feeling like linear corridors of clutter, races branch off and criss-cross through large areas hosting more tumbling junk than most spare bedrooms



Bugbear has been dedicating a serious portion of its development time to optimisation of the PS2 game. "You only have to take one look at the PS2 version of *FlatOut 2* to appreciate how much performance you can get out of that old war horse if you know how to handle it," says Laakkonen





Perhaps as a victory strut based on the moderate success of the original, *FlatOut 2*'s soundtrack features a swathe of bigger-name guitar-based bands (such as Mötley Crüe, Nirvana and Supergrass) than the selection of European indie that *FlatOut* featured first time around



All about US

As Bugbear is fully aware, the environments in the first *FlatOut* were a touch disconnected, a collection of generic landscapes that provided differing road surfaces and little else. *FlatOut 2*'s tracks offer a tour of the USA, with races in the Rocky Mountains, Virginian crop fields and Los Angeles. "The game doesn't aim to replicate these environments realistically, but instead to capture the feeling of being there," says Laakkonen. "But we're sure that anybody who has seen *Terminator 2* will immediately feel at home barging through the LA storm drains."



FORMAT: **GC**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **VIVARIUM**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **APRIL 14**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E138, E151**

Yoot Saito's Odama

The release date rolls ever closer, but Nintendo's pinball warlord still sounds like an April fool



With its massed troop movement, wide perspective and detailed, naturalistic style, *Odama* is an unusual but thrilling spectacle on a console, a sort of tabletop *Total War*. The chanting adds strongly to the atmosphere, too



Training yourself and your men in voice commands is vital. *Odama's* unusual interface fits with Nintendo thinking, and Saito is now thinking about a DS version

K*atamari's* out, *Colossus* tops the charts, *Phoenix Wright* is around the corner and *Chibi Robo* is on its way in May. Publishers' willingness to put esoteric Japanese games on European shelves seems to be at an all-time high, but you still have to wonder if this voice-activated hybrid of feudal military strategy and pinball would be getting a global release, let alone a near-simultaneous one, if the GameCube's schedule wasn't quite so desolately empty. Its creator **Yoot Saito** (also father of the talking fish *Seaman*) disagrees, arguing that it's a universal game. "I wanted it to be something that Japan, Europe, and the US could all look at from roughly the same distance: a medieval setting," he says. In other words, it's just as weird for everybody.

The Odama itself – the vast, flipper-propelled iron ball that can crush your own troops as well as the enemy's as it lumbers around the battlefield – is not the only strategic hunk of metal you, as the disenfranchised warlord Kagetora, will need to keep an eye on. To progress to the next area, a small troop of men carrying a huge bell must be safely shepherded to the gate at the top of the screen; special actions can be triggered by ringing it with the Odama. This troupe's movement is the focus of the vocal commands you'll be barking into the controller-mounted microphone that will ship with the game. The remainder of your army responds to general orders like 'push' and 'rally', but is fairly autonomous when it comes to overcoming obstacles, gaining control of additional flippers and engaging the enemy.

Combining the checks and balances and best-laid plans of realtime strategy with the chaos of pinball is a daunting, not to say foolhardy, goal. Most previous attempts to blend pinball with systematic videogame structure have ended in at best compromise and at worst unplayable frustration, and those didn't have to implement mass troop AI, or the holy grail of reliable voice recognition. "It's been incredibly difficult to balance this game," agrees Saito, explaining why the title has been so long in development. "Even from the planning stages it's been an interesting game, but to make it so has required a lot of tuning on our part."

It's encouraging that Vivarium is taking the time to refine *Odama* and, if nothing else, the level design currently shows plenty of variety and ingenuity within its tight parameters. But initial impressions are of a game that's as capricious as it is charmingly surreal, and that's very difficult to wrest meaningful control of. And that could make the difference between *Odama* being hailed as a cult classic or just another oddball.





Collateral damage is pretty much unavoidable in giant pinball warfare, so maintaining morale is important. Pressing A dispenses food, but shouldn't be overused lest the army gets complacent. A second player can plug in *Donkey Konga* bongos and literally drum up enthusiasm

Mic battle

"I think that while you're giving voice commands you also get the feeling that you're participating and working hard as well, almost like playing in an American football game," says Saito of *Odama's* voice recognition. However, its inclusion separates out the strategy commands from the pinball inputs, ensuring the controls aren't "ridiculously difficult and complex". He's not surprised voice communication hasn't caught on, though: "To tell you the truth, the kind of voice recognition required for *Seaman* is incredibly difficult – *Seaman 2* has been in development for five or six years – and that's something you just can't devote your time to unless you're a private company."

In the event of disaster, a tap of the Z button will bring on reinforcements at the bottom of the screen. You can also save the day by tilting the battlefield with the analogue stick to steer the ball, which still ranks as *Odama's* least realistic feature: quite a feat









A surprising, and rather inexplicable, graphical overhaul has been given to Rose, the glamorous hostess. She has developed rather more chiselled cheekbones, and perhaps more inflated charms, than in *The Music Quiz*





The overall presentation is still very clear, if a little clinical. Some of the images used to illustrate the questions have a photo-library feel to them, and can even create confusion about the precise subject of the question





The games are still very reliant on the coloured option buttons, which are essential for keeping as many players as possible involved in each question, especially now that up to eight can play at once. But it's a disappointment not to be using the big, fat, tempting red buzzer

Buzz! The Big Quiz

Not so much a million-dollar question as a no-brainer: Sony rolls out the next phase of its new empire

Your starter for ten: what was the UK's videogame Christmas number one in 2005? Sony's plan was for it to be *Buzz! The Music Quiz*, presumably thinking that *Need For Speed* couldn't possibly make it three in a row. But despite its crowd-pleasing buzzer controllers, calculatingly bland presentation and high-energy turn from housewives' favourite Jason Donovan, *Buzz* only just squeezed into the top 20. So was the whole *Buzz* venture ill-advised?

Not if its sales since are anything to go by. *Buzz* has stuck firmly in the charts since its release, and its strong sales are proving, yet again, that Sony UK is leading the way in widening the appeal of the world's most mainstream console. And since Relentless always had total confidence in the appeal of its idea, it's no suprise the general knowledge version – to be sold both with and without the buzzers – appeared so soon. But it's also no surprise, since there hasn't been much time between the two games, that *The Big Quiz* suffers from some of the same frustrations as its predecessor.

The range of question categories – including movies, geography, politics, natural history and sport – is wide enough to satisfy any trivia buff without being off-puttingly in-depth. And to reflect this range, the question types have evolved – asking you to identify pictures of local landmarks, buzz in with the nationality of globe-trotting popstars and pick your way through a multiple-choice minefield of William Hague's biography subject. But despite the range of topics, the loss of the musical snippets saps the game of some of its atmosphere. Instead, *The Big Quiz* relies on its participants to provide a soundtrack of guffawing laughter and embarrassed shouts.

Some rounds, such as Pass The Bomb, have been subtly overhauled to improve their play dynamics, but there are still too many rounds which don't quite work: how can you buzz in to identify the nearest example when you don't know how many examples are going to be shown? And despite attempts to shape each game with Pointbuilder and Pointstealer rounds, there's still no real sense of progression – or of mounting excitement – as the show comes to an end.

The problem now for Relentless is that, with the success of the current version, there can be little impetus to do much more than tweak the game in the future. But, hopefully, later editions will see the game reach its full potential.



FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **RELENTLESS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **MARCH 17**

Blankety Blank

When we spoke to Relentless before *Buzz's* launch last year (E153), it was no secret that other versions of the game were in the pipeline. The new character roster – with its strong emphasis on movie stars and sporting heroes – gives a clear idea of what we can expect next, although no announcements have yet been made.





The Yamibito (literally 'people of darkness') give the levels and missions a new twist. Characters must turn off lights to hide from Shibito, but turn them on to keep the Yamibito and the amorphous creatures that resurrect the Shibito at bay

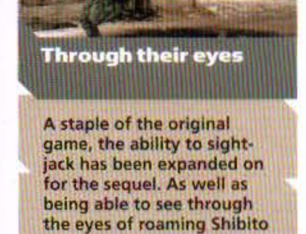




Siren 2

The siren sounds for a second time as Sony returns to horror – Japanese style

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCEJ**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **NOW (JAPAN), SUMMER (UK)**



Through their eyes

A staple of the original game, the ability to sight-jack has been expanded on for the sequel. As well as being able to see through the eyes of roaming Shibito and companion characters, several of the protagonists in *Siren 2* have enhanced abilities. While playing as fortune-teller Akiko it is possible to see the past, tinged in sepia. Ikuko, on the other hand, can take over a Shibito and control its actions for a short period of time, and author Shu Mikami can use the eyes of his dog Tsukasa to navigate levels that, otherwise, would be a featureless blur of light and shadow.

Like all good horror games, *Siren 2* has at its heart a fear that simultaneously repulses and attracts. It's a phenomenon which acts on the player just as strongly as it does on the characters it depicts: the same fear that makes you nervous of moving on also drives you to discover the root of your terror. Not that journalist Mamoru Itsuki gets much of a choice, as he's sent to investigate an isolated island in the Sea of Japan where, 29 years ago, a girl was found washed up on the beach. Soon after, all other inhabitants mysteriously disappeared.

When the boat he is travelling on capsizes after being hit by a freak wave, Itsuki is washed up on a very different island where amorphous creatures drift in darkness and the sky is tinged red. Houses are abandoned, but when the siren sounds it soon becomes apparent that this place is not as deserted as it first appeared. *Siren 2* follows ten characters – including a mermaid-obsessed author, a fortune-teller, a sailor-suited schoolgirl and two members of Japan's Self Defence Force – as they try to survive long enough to discover the nature of the earlier disaster.

Consequently, the atmosphere of isolated yet claustrophobic fear seems likely to be sustained from the first game, but this time around weapons are more available, with most characters able to wield anything from Uzis to an umbrella. Even without access to an improvised arsenal, characters can now hijack cars and run the zombie-like Shibito down just for the fun of it. However, these new skills apply just as equally to the Shibito, who you'll now find equipped with everything from pistols to rapid-firing 9mms. The increased emphasis on combat means the game can reduce its dependence on the constant sight-jacking – or tuning into other characters' viewpoints – which so quickly turned from thrill to chore in the original.

Other improvements include making item use automatic and allowing you to show your location on the all-too-confusing map. And, after the two-hits-and-you're-dead encounters of the original, the unseen life bar has been extended so that, unless a Shibito happens to be wielding some high-calibre weaponry, death is no longer instantaneous. It remains to be seen if these refinements will come at the cost of undercutting the purity that made the first game as fresh as it was frustrating.

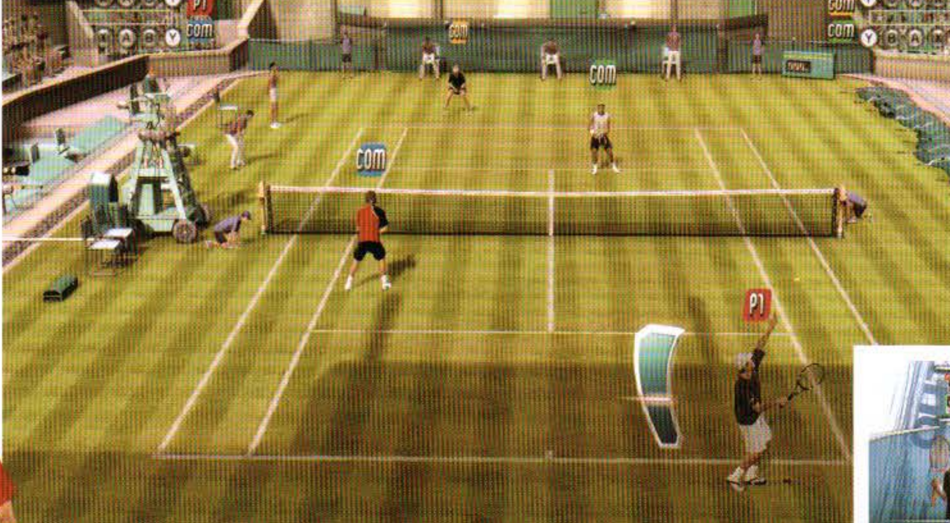


As in the original game, the characters are photorealistic and based on the actors who play them. Rarely have the uncanny valley's unsettling qualities been put to such good effect. As well as a mine and a suburban Japanese home, *Siren 2* also introduces some new locations such as a claustrophobic ferry, amusement park and pier; you can even watch waves breaking in the blood-red ocean



While many of the missions involve shepherding an NPC from point A to B, the AI has been improved so that your companions can now hold weapons of their own, move with more autonomy, and even come to your aid in a fight





Top Spin 2 has one of the most powerful character-creation tools yet seen; it actually generates convincing humans, and the skin shaders are uncanny. Age, serve action and grunt style can all be specified







The game has 37 venues, from backyard practice courts, all the way to licensed Masters and Grand Slam arenas. Ironically, the only missing Slam licence is Roland Garros, seat of the French Open (Paris-based PAM's home event)

FORMAT: **360, DS, GBA**
PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **PAM DEVELOPMENT**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **APRIL**

Top Spin 2

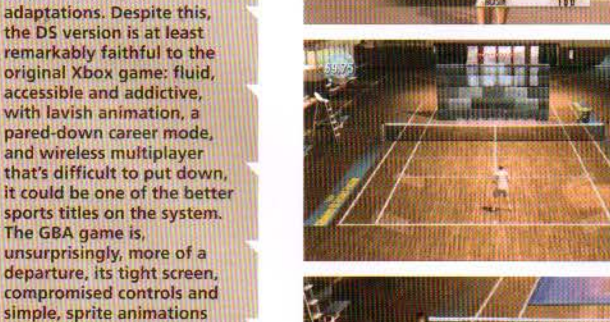
Top Spin returns to make an early title bid in the 360's online sports championships, and it's aiming to serve deep

In the never-ending wrangles and exchanges between committed online gamers and the authors of their games, it's common enough to hear of developers having to clamp down on players' abuse of unintentional, unbalancing loopholes in the game system, or exploits. It's much more unusual to hear of the tables being turned: players ruling a core element of the game design unfair, deeming its use an exploit, and outlawing it. Yet that's exactly what happened to *Top Spin*'s 'risk shot' at the top end of the very healthy – and, it seems, sportsmanlike – online tournament scene that sprung up on Xbox Live after its 2003 release. The hard-to-time shot modifier was intended to be a gamble that would produce either an outright winner or a miss, but once nailed by dedicated players, it was simply too powerful.

PAM Development, acutely aware of how well its tennis game had done online and keen to build on that with the sequel, *Top Spin 2*, has been smart enough to listen closely to its constituents. So the risk shot has been made much harder, its irregular timing intended to make it more of a last-ditch move for a desperate player. And most of the tuning of *Top Spin*'s already well-rounded and intuitive tennis system has been geared to give it far greater tactical and skill depth, the better to withstand the longer lifespan of an online game.

The pace has been slowed; the physics rewritten to make topspin and slice shots more technically demanding; players' character strengths and weaknesses are more significant; and as well as holding down a shot button for more attacking power, a short tap now produces a slow, high ball that excels in defensive situations. The 'In the zone' meter has been redubbed 'Momentum' and unlocks tricksy 'Advanced' shots, like a wide side slice, as it builds. All of which sounds like a significant threat to *Top Spin*'s accessibility, but time spent with a near-complete preview version proves it's still possible to enjoy the game with just one button – the all-purpose safe shot on A – and to be competitive using the basic shot selection alone, should you wish.

It can be just as big a mistake to neglect the offline side of an online success story, however. PAM's answer is to integrate the two, also increasing the breadth and depth of the player-building aspect of the career mode, which is so important for online success (but not too high a hurdle – players' stats should be maxed out after two or three of the five seasons). There's no question that *Top Spin 2* will be the most complete, involving tennis game on the shelves come April, and it goes without saying that it will be the prettiest too. Whether it can still claim to be the everyman's choice in this everyman sport, only time will tell.



Spin-offs

PAM is also producing versions of *Top Spin 2* for the two Nintendo handheld consoles, although it prefers to refer to them as extensions of the *Top Spin* brand rather than adaptations. Despite this, the DS version is at least remarkably faithful to the original Xbox game: fluid, accessible and addictive, with lavish animation, a pared-down career mode, and wireless multiplayer that's difficult to put down, it could be one of the better sports titles on the system. The GBA game is, unsurprisingly, more of a departure, its tight screen, compromised controls and simple, sprite animations dictating a rapid, arcade-style pace. Initially this is off-putting, but becomes exhilarating when you do string a few shots together. Still, it's unlikely to last long in the face of *Mario Tennis*.







Professional players are represented, though their game styles are arguably more faithful than their portraits. It's possible to indulge male vs female fantasies, too. The game drops its poker face for the training tasks, which have the faintly surreal, physical setups of *Virtua* or *Mario Tennis* minigames. Attempts to spice up the career mode include special events that are triggered by coach, sponsor or rival



FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **MARVELOUS INTERACTIVE**
DEVELOPER: **GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE INC**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **MARCH 30 (JAPAN), TBC (UK)**



The more conventional aspects of *Contact*'s RPG gameplay are clear in its boss battles, but even then you'll be swiping special attack stickers across the screen with the stylus







The contrasting art styles of the game's two takes on reality are quite startlingly different. The top screen shows the inside of the ship as the professor sees it, the bottom as its outside appears to the rest of the world

Contact

It's a card-collecting, stylus-controlled, online-enabled, life-sim RPG. And that's the easy bit to get your head around

It's rare when the most straightforward thing you can say about a game is that it's a collaboration between the people who made *Harvest Moon* and the people who made *Killer 7*. But no matter how strange the game you're currently imagining – a seed propagator stuffed with severed heads, maybe? – it won't be quite as original as *Contact*'s set-up.

A mysterious professor, fleeing some more mysterious pursuers, is contacted by a yet more mysterious intelligence through the means of an entirely mysterious device. That intelligence is you, the device your DS, and the professor, soon stranded on Earth once his spaceship crashes during the chase, is in need of your help. Being a quick thinker (as any professor should be), your new friend quickly disguises his damaged spacecraft as a pirate ship and enlists the help of a young local boy, Cherry, to run errands to help him repair it. So you, through the means of your mysterious DS, guide Cherry on his way, with the professor looking on. The professor lives in the crisp, pixellated sterility of the top screen, Cherry in the lush, naturalist wilds of the bottom. When he wanders up to the top screen to check in with the Prof, the two art styles clash in neat underlining of the close-encounter themes of the story.

It's as radical a rationale for the DS's twin screens as has been attempted yet, but once in control of Cherry, things take on a much more conservative air. Control works either with the D-pad or the stylus, both of which work well, and there are chests to find, bosses to defeat and shortcuts to uncover. Combat is automatic – a little similar to how some MMOs work: approach an enemy, select your attack stance and watch while you trade blows. Your tactical input comes from selecting special attacks, deciding if it's time to run away, and using the game's other big DS-inspired idea: seals. These are extra-special moves, perhaps allowing you to summon an ally, handle dangerous material or unleash a particularly powerful attack, and must be peeled like a sticker out of your seal book, and then stuck down over the action where you need them – all with a swipe of the stylus. This feels a little clumsy in the preview code – as do a few other elements of the game – but there may be time to address this before a European release.

So, aptly enough for the use it makes of the two screens, *Contact* is looking like being a game of two halves. The set-up and presentation are as high-concept as they come: technically impressive and genuinely imaginative. But the meat and potatoes of the gaming – in the initial stages at least – are just that. A longer test will be needed to see if the two balance each other out, or tear the game in two.



Levelling up is fast and automatic, and organising your deck of seals before battle promises to add tactical depth

Farming the fun

It wouldn't be a Marvelous game without some life-sim element and, true to form, *Contact* will offer worthy hobbies like cooking and fishing. However, these – as in the *Harvest Moon* games – are mildly diverting rather than actively enjoyable. The big question mark hanging over *Contact* is if any of its ambitious ideas are actually going to be fun to play. But, perhaps precisely to address this, it has an ace up its sleeve: 'NES-like minigames'. These haven't yet been shown, but should help ensure *Contact* is a satisfying game rather than just an intriguing experience.



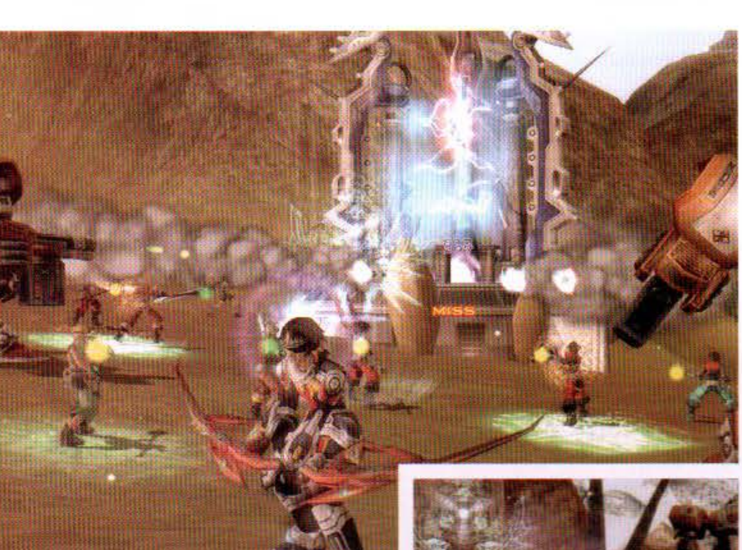
Although some of the game's dungeons are pretty unspectacular, the lush, organic 'realistic' world view is inspired more by oil paintings than clinical pixel art

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **CCR INC**
ORIGIN: **SOUTH KOREA**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW**

RF Online

This stylish import may look seductive to the MMO unfaithful, but the unwary are in for a shock


Audiovisually, *RF Online* has a sharp, cool beauty that's strongly reminiscent of *Phantasy Star Online*. It's unlikely to prove as big a crossover hit as Sega's game, however


Much is made of the importance of large-scale player-versus-player battles in *RF Online*, the supreme faction on any server enjoying access to the best mineral resources. But popular as PvP may be to MMO players, the appetite for organised, mass conflict is unproven

Maybe, in *World Of WarCraft*'s ever-expanding wake, Codemasters has found itself ruing the September 2004 cancellation 'for technical reasons' of its own MMO, *Dragon Empires*, a game that might just have given it a foothold in the blossoming market. Or maybe the publisher simply needed to find a quick way to turn its investment in online gaming expertise and infrastructure into profit. Either way, snapping up a proven South Korean hit – *RF Online* has a million players in the Far East and rising – looks like a shrewd decision on paper, providing a (hopefully) cheap, fast and trouble-free launch for its Codemasters Online Gaming service in Europe and the US, when most MMO launches are anything but.

It picked a pretty one, too, in CCR Inc's game, with an edge of hard science to its fantasy fiction that would attract those turned off by dungeons and dragons, and marketed it cannily enough to generate a healthy swell of interest in the short beta and recent budget release. The three playable factions, fighting for freedom from Arcane rule but also fighting each other for dominance in the Novus galaxy, are tremendously appealing: the mystical, elfen Cora, the impish Bellato engineers with their giant robot servants, and the imposing Accretian man-machines. The four available classes are rather basic, though – melee warrior, ranger, magic user, hybrid – and chances to specialise them don't arrive until levels 30 and 40.

But Codemasters unwisely counted without the huge gulf in MMO traditions between east and west, which the accessible *World Of WarCraft*, despite its own eastern success, has only widened. *RF Online* couldn't be more unwelcoming. It offers little help and advice with its complex battle system beyond the very basics, questing is an unsignposted, poorly structured mystery, and there seems to be a basic expectation that players will be happy to indulge in ceaseless, mechanical grinding. As a window to another world – that world, sadly, being the mindset of a Korean net café addict, not some far-away galaxy – *RF Online* is interesting, but the casually curious should steer well clear.

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **NHN GAMES**
ORIGIN: **SOUTH KOREA**
RELEASE: **Q3**

ArchLord

Codemasters' second new MMO allows you to be king for a month. But will it be one for all, or all for one?

ArchLord's **world is polished and lush, and combat boasts striking effects. The overall art style has the traditional flourish of far eastern fantasy, even if the characters themselves are expressionless dolls**

Codemasters' other offering on the MMO bandwagon is reserved for another Korean signing, but not only is *ArchLord* likely to prove just as foreign and alienating an experience for western players as *RF Online*, it's much less of a known quantity. Despite having been in beta testing in its homeland since the middle of last year, and on shelves there since January, a veil of mystery surrounds *ArchLord*'s workings and its success to date

The one thing that is abundantly clear – and doubtless made the game look like an easy sell and therefore a sensible buy to Codemasters, just like *RFO*'s distinguishing looks – is its USP. Every month, players will compete to unite the five Archon relics and so become the one and only ArchLord, ruler of the entire gameworld (or rather, we assume, server). Alongside special equipment, a bodyguard and access to elite areas, the ArchLord will get powers that allow them to shape the world for other players, presumably to the advantage of their guild and the disadvantage of everyone else. It's not clear what these are, although some are certain to be economic; furthermore, on the mechanism by which the ArchLord will be chosen, whether the position can be held more than once, and all other questions, Codemasters is worryingly silent. Worryingly because MMO player-ranking systems are famously difficult to balance, and because a great many of them become horrifically unhealthy night-and-day endurance tests.

As instantly attractive as the thought of ruling an MMO space is, the implications of the ArchLord system are likely to be far less attractive to players outside of Korea. One is likely to be an intense concentration on the extremely complex organised combat between factions and guilds. Another is that ArchLord candidates will probably need to be nominated representatives of large, powerful guilds, or more likely, alliances of guilds.

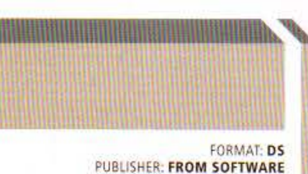
Genuine political and social hierarchies within virtual worlds may be exciting to academics, but they're probably anathema to the individualist western gamer, for most of whom the very attraction of an MMO is that anyone and everyone can become a hero.

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2006**

New Super Mario Bros

In between all the sporty spin-offs and witty RPG questing, Nintendo is finally finding time to take the bros back to basics





In terms of wifi content, *New Super Mario Bros* allows versus play between Luigi and Mario, although just how different it'll be to the archetypal single-screen POW deathmatch is yet to be revealed. Other multiplayer modes are mooted, too

The name seems an obvious placeholder, but rarely has one been able to tell the player all they need to know in such a concise and promising manner. It's the kind of shorthand usually reserved for vague next-gen products, but this is Nintendo's attempt at broaching a different kind of generational gap, updating Mario's classic side-scrolling repartee in a fitting manner. It's still a conversion of sorts, though, converting an old way of playing for a new way of thinking.

Details are still sketchy, but what is known is that it will feature a number of 3D aspects that will allow for some neat effects, the kind of touches, animation and action that are virtually impossible to replicate in a depthless playing field. This could explain why the brothers themselves and their numerous enemies are rendered in an ever-so-slightly muddy, pseudo-3D style

Inevitably, the basic concept of the game remains the same, with a majority of play taking place on the upper screen, and the lower screen used to display the underground portion of stages. A more typical DS solution will also be present, though, with the lower screen mainly dedicated to the storing and usage of items.



An item will swell Mario to screen-filling size, making him capable of crushing or blasting nearly anything in his way

The DS's killer app is its game catalogue as a whole, but few pieces of software have stood as such fine exploitations of hardware as *Super Mario Bros*, *World* and *64*, leaving *New* with its work cut out. Hopefully the extra time and thought being invested here will take it from a good idea, well executed – the DS's stock-in-trade – to a brilliant one, implemented with true flair.

Tenchu: Dark Shadow

The tools of the killing trade go over the player's head, as a newer machine brings an older perspective to the series

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **FROM SOFTWARE**
DEVELOPER: **POLYGON MAGIC**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **APRIL 6 (JPN), TBA (US/UK)**



The number of possible traps, items and ninjitsu techniques available throughout *Dark Shadow* tot up at just over 200, offering an expanded kitbag that'll perhaps balance the downsized format and different perspective

Obligatory DS pun aside, *Dark Shadow* is perhaps an apt name: instead of just lingering in the shade, you'll have to spend a lot more time there. The focus present in this handheld iteration of the oriental assassination series is the laying of traps, and not the traditional neck-snapping, throat-slashing hit'n'run slaying, meaning more time is spent conspiring and less time executing split-second assaults.

These traps appear in various categories – leg traps, needles, poison, fire, laughter and more – and laying them in the path of your enemies opens up the possibility of combo offensives, allowing you to stack your suprises in the manner of Tecmo's *Trapt*. Although in contrast to that game, there's no clear idea yet of whether the reward for this is an enhanced grade, a requirement for offing some of the heftier enemies or just a chance to giggle with sick glee at your own morbid ingenuity. And, as is to be expected, new traps can be fashioned from items and raw materials to be found scattered throughout each stage.



Games like *Tenchu* are helping the DS prove itself an entirely competent, if not especially elegant, 3D machine

Viewed from a more impersonal, tilted overhead thirdperson camera, it's unclear whether there'll be a perspective shift when the player needs to peek around a wall, but the lower screen will allow for a persistent map, and serves as a murderous media player for the death animations of successfully snagged foes, helping to bring the player closer to the action from this more distanced viewpoint. Hopefully, it'll be the piece of streamlining that could help tackle the slight clumsiness that has taken the sheen off the series' recent console outings.



Fourplayer wifi is offered, allowing players to tussle in a gnarled and tense trap battle that should occupy the gap left by the lack of deserving update to *Spy Vs Spy*. Or, more socially, they can simply trade items



Breezy Valley is home to the game's first vehicle section. The first task seems tricky – exterminate 25 pests across the area within a time limit – until the game helpfully highlights remaining targets as the clock runs down



Daxter



Naughty Dog's moonlighting mammal turns Rentokil gopher, but that's the bad news over with for this sidekick's sidequest

And so – just like that – a good portion of the appeal of *Liberty City Stories* is gone. Ready At Dawn has rendered a gameworld that, visually, packs more first-impression punch than that of PSP's *GTA*. It is vast, moves smoothly, and has cutscene and animation values on a par with the rest of the *Jak* series; of course, there's none of the bustle and feature-richness of Rockstar's outing, but its slickness is striking, hindered only by the barest of slowdown. It's this, now, that will be the benchmark game that proves you really do have a PSP in your pocket.

Split from Jak, Daxter lands a job as a bug exterminator in Haven City, the perfect small-fry prey for the diminutive cohort. Electrified fly swatter in hand, Daxter's first few commissions are straight out of platforming's tutorial-land – generic trips that involve navigating largely linear environments while splattering small groups of bugs and nailing double-jumps.

A stealth crawl is also introduced for bypassing stronger enemies and for scuttling into pipes and vents. This proves wearying in its initial use, but there's a solid quality to the game's production that makes *Daxter* not so much reminiscent of the *Jak* series but of *Sly Raccoon*. Daxter's basic swipe attack has a generous range, with a combo mechanic that proves satisfying when confronting groups of hazardous insects. A reliable camera is aided well by using the shoulder buttons to rotate the view, there are some quick and friendly invisible restart points, a regular and unobtrusive autosave, and character movement is confident and well-weighted.

Of course, despite this sure-footed realisation, just how much variety it can maintain within its handsome expanse is still to be seen. Putting Daxter to 'bed' at his home gives access to a number of minigames in the form of his dreams; the first is a cheeky pastiche of *The Matrix*, a rhythm-action fight scene that doesn't feel novel but whose presentation and execution are polished enough to prove a draw.

Based on the opening areas of the game, this seems to be a fair summary of *Daxter*: a well-bred platformer whose technical qualities are never in doubt and whose core ideas are integrated together snugly, but has little in the way of standalone highlights. And, given the control restrictions of its host platform, the fact that it might feel a little plain in places may prove to be the more palatable of two evils. *Daxter* may very well be one of the better deals that PSP owners are cut in 2006.





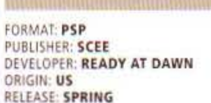
Daxter's most reminiscent of *Jak II*, with an urban hub that splits off to more desolate environments; indeed, the game covers the story of how the pair were reunited at the beginning of *Jak II*. Daxter's wiseguy shtick seems more tolerable when he's the star of the show, too







Like its PS2 namesake, *Daxter* features minimal loading times and the world remains virtually seamless, with small chambers and elevators used as loading bays. Whatever drain the fluency may put on battery life, the resulting scale and clarity of *Daxter*'s visuals are worth it



FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **READY AT DAWN**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SPRING**



Metal Slugs

As a wifi extra and a singleplayer distraction, *Daxter* includes a subgame known as Bug Combat. A direct relative of any number of creature-breeding fight games it may be – think *Magic Pengel*, or *Pokémon Coliseum* with its paper/rock/scissors replaced by claw/spit/trap – but there's a kind of freshness about being able to set the power of each offensive with a well-timed button press. New bugs are collected by unearthing them within the main game, while a combatant's stats can be bulked out with potions found by exploring in a similar manner.



A thousand precursor orbs, the chief currency of the *Jak* series, are dotted across the gameworld, whose collection performs the task of unlocking cheats and extras. There's a further bonus for PS2 owners: connect via USB to the console to unlock exclusive *Jak X* content

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MAY**

Field Commander

It's war, as Sony's online division moves into handheld territory currently controlled by Nintendo

Battles are spectacular, especially when the more extraordinary unit types become involved. Nonetheless, the bread-and-butter tactical play of tanks, grunts and scouts can still prove enduringly fascinating. As with *Advanced Wars*, the careful, considered pace of play is perfectly suited to a handheld



One of the questions to which gaming has no answer is: when does a homage turn into a rip-off? *Field Commander*, which at first sight looks like one of the PSP's freshest titles, only muddies further the already murky waters.

This looks like *Advance Wars* with grown-up graphics. As a précis of the game, there's no fairer way to say it. You can move units turn by turn, weigh up their strengths and weakness against other infantry, vehicle, air and sea enemies, commit to an attack which plays out zoomed-in on the action, and invest your income from capturing buildings into new troops. Repeat until victory.

Which isn't to say that *Field Commander*'s appeal stops there. It adds new unit types, and new abilities to familiar units, increasing the tactical options at every turn. Different divisions and commanders bring unique abilities to the battlefield (itself, of course, an idea *Advance Wars* could have inspired), which, combined with local terrain and weather conditions, adds up to a complex challenge. And, as you would expect from Sony's in-house online specialists, it takes full advantage of the PSP's wifi capabilities for fully online matches and local ad-hoc battles, as well as single-machine 'hot-seat' play.



The clear blue water between *Field Commander* and *Advance Wars* is just that: the representation of the outside world, from forests to beaches and lakes, is delicate and detailed, automatically providing beautiful backdrops as you zoom in from map view to battle view

Early code is still a little rocky, but there's every reason to hope that this could be as engrossing on PSP as on GBA. It's just a little unsettling to see the work of one firstparty studio echoed so closely in the work of another firstparty studio. But there are few better blueprints than that refined by *Advance Wars* over the years, and there are no grounds for complaint about the generosity with which it's been interpreted. If it also manages to replicate the all-important balancing of game elements, then fans of *Advance Wars* may find themselves as impressed as they are indignant.

Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy

As Traveller's Tales allies itself with the LucasArts empire, its feisty adaptation remains rebellious

FORMAT: **DS, GC, PC, PS2, PSP, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **LUCASARTS**
DEVELOPER: **TRAVELLER'S TALES**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**





As if they weren't imbued with enough personality, each member of *The Original Trilogy*'s plastic population has a unique special attack. Chewbacca's, fittingly, involves pulling arms out of their sockets

Lego Star Wars didn't so much secure the support of a wide audience as capture, for entirely separate reasons, the hearts of two. Children warmed to its lack of condescension and to adults it provided an antidote to George Lucas' wavering prequels. For its successor – at first glance a project with everything to gain – the use of *Episodes IV* to *VI* as source material is, in the eyes of adults at least, of significant concern. Will innocent parody earn the same appreciation when applied to something treasured rather than tainted? The likelihood is that it will, because Traveller's Tales' approach remains solely about play, and never about ridicule. Uninhibited play is the ambition.

There is, for example, nothing to stop you approaching *The Original Trilogy*'s vehicle-based levels as leisurely explorations, much like its (and its predecessor's) on-foot stages. The Death Star trench run and Hoth defence won't tie you to a rail or linear route, instead welcoming the use of a wide range of vehicles and characters without the restriction of what's appropriate. The design philosophy is unsurprisingly generous, adding another three movies' worth of weapons, characters and vehicles to the original roster. But it's also concerned with lifting restrictions previously introduced. Construction abilities and block manoeuvres are no longer exclusive to Jedi characters, and ships assembled through the acquisition of hidden parts will, thanks to new bonus stages, have purposes beyond decoration.

There is no sense that development of *The Original Trilogy* was done on autopilot. Confronted with the need to turn a novelty item into something extendible, its developer has piled on a second helping of gimmicks and jovial references (to the universes of both Lego and *Star Wars*) while steadily reinforcing its foundations. As if to question its perception as a kids'-title-cum-curio the game promises an adaptive difficulty level to widen its challenge factor to something that befits its broad market appeal. The end result might not be a reinvention or even a particularly altered experience, but so long as it enjoys toying with itself, we'll look forward to playing.





It's no surprise to see Traveller's Tales sticking with its last-gen codebase, the series' engine offering all the geometric complexity required of both its building-block characters and more conventional scenery. This is one multiplatform project that should function well on PSP

INDUSTRIOUS MIGHT AND MAGIC

THE VENERABLE DUNGEON-CRAWLING SERIES GETS PHYSICAL, AS UBISOFT REINTRODUCES MIGHT AND MAGIC WITH A HALF-LIFE 2-ENGINED FIRSTPERSON SLASHER

TITLE: **DARK MESSIAH OF MIGHT AND MAGIC**
FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **ARKANE STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **2006**



Accidents will happen. It's especially true in a cliffside village perched on struts out over infinity, where a Freeze spell has left a slick of ice on the already precarious walkway. An orc warrior rounds the corner with a guttural warcry, slips over backwards, and plummets to the cerulean ocean far below in shocked silence.

"The main purpose of the spell is to freeze enemies," observes Arkane Studios' CEO **Raphael Colantonio**, "but one day I found everyone gathered around a monitor laughing at this."

Dark Messiah's development and developer seem to attract happy accidents: a silver lining to the adversity Colantonio faced when he left EA (a cricket ball on his desk hints at past duties) to form a hardcore PC RPG studio. "We were big fans of Looking Glass, of the [*Ultima*] *Underworld*s and *Ultima VII* – but it was a crazy idea to start a studio

in '99 when all the RPG developers were folding, or about to fold," he reflects. Regardless, Colantonio and his then four-strong team set about not just creating a game inspired by *Ultima Underworld*, but an actual *UU3*, by approaching Looking Glass founder Paul Neurath directly. "Paul was very excited about it – but he had the IP rights, not the distribution rights," Colantonio recalls, "so then we met with EA... and that's where that story ends."

Instead, Arkane developed its homage, *Arx Fatalis*, which achieved quiet cult success despite its creator's admission of "a lot of rough edges and a lot of bugs." He continues: "But somehow, it still placed us in the area we wanted to be. It's how we met Valve – we were demonstrating the Xbox version at E3, and this guy came by and said: 'Hey, we just wanted to say we really liked your game'. So by opportunity, by accident, he took us to see the *Half-Life 2* demo, and we got in contact with them about the engine. They were really enthusiastic about giving us access to their technology before *HL2* was actually released, which was a big boost for us."

A Source-enabled demo attracted the attention of Ubisoft, itself planning the return of its recently acquired Might And Magic brand, and the publisher suggested combining the studio's chosen firstperson direction with M&M's re-emergence. It's an agreement that has allowed Arkane to become less dependent on good intentions alone: "At the end of *Arx* we were nine people, and now we're about 30, plus external contractors. It's been hard, changing our habits and learning to delegate, but I have a better life than I did on *Arx*, and we also have a better game."

Production has also benefited from his seemingly boundless network of contacts. *Thief* series producer/designer Randy Smith and *HL2* art director Viktor Antonov have both lent their talents as freelance consultants, and Colantonio's soliciting of one of the *Thief* fan-mission community's most respected authors convinced him to resign from his accounting job, sell his house and relocate with family from the US to Lyon for a year of in-house level design. We can't help but wonder aloud: just what is Colantonio's secret to making friends and influencing people?

"You just have to ask," he grins. "It's like the prettiest girl in high school who everyone's too afraid to ask out – when someone does, they get the date."



But *Dark Messiah*'s concerns are more with the crowd who lurked at the back of the library: while *Might And Magic*'s heyday under New World Computing was in the distant early '90s, a sizeable community has still followed the series through its 3DO wilderness years. "The first *M&M* I really liked was *III*, and I remember really enjoying *V*, but *VI* is where it started to... well, to be honest, I didn't play *VII* and *VIII*," confesses Colantonio. "But what was interesting was the challenge of renewing this very well-known name without betraying it, and being part of writing the background of the world."

"I THINK PLAYERS HAVE MATURED. PEOPLE WHO PLAYED M&M WHEN THEY WERE 12 ARE NEARER 30 NOW. THAT'S WHY WE'RE GOING FOR A MORE BELIEVABLE FEEL"

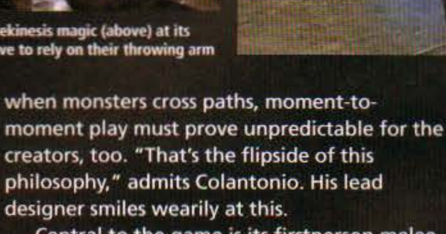
The franchise has spanned many gameworlds, so Ubisoft's introduction of a fresh-slate universe, Ashan, isn't necessarily an upheaval. An emphasis on 'dark' and 'mature' in every reference to it, though, is perhaps more concerning to those who recall the colourful, airbrushed visuals of the early PC titles. "We had a darker style from our own tastes, but medieval fantasy in general is taking this route – look at Lord Of The Rings. I think players have matured as well: people who played *M&M* when they were 12 are nearer 30 now, so that's why we're going for a more believable, less comical feel," says Colantonio. "Ten years ago, art direction was a completely different job, but now we have to

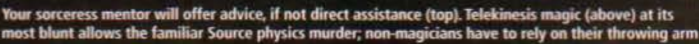












Your sorceress mentor will offer advice, if not direct assistance (top). Telekinesis magic (above) at its most blunt allows the familiar Source physics murder; non-magicians have to rely on their throwing arm

compete with the movies, we have the technology to do better things and have art directors coming in from different disciplines, so it's natural that the style has progressed this way."

Haunting rather than sullen, *Dark Messiah*'s environments show a weathered nobility that bears out Colantonio's explanation. Much effort has been spent on visibly stratifying the world, as goblin, orc and even human settlements are all squatters on the remains of a vanished empire. High fantasy is present and accounted for, then, but in a context unlike any M&M offshoot before. "I don't think anyone really knew what to expect, although people on the forums were sceptical: 'If it's action it's not going to be a real RPG'," Colantonio sighs. "We're doing an honest game that we believe will be immersive and deep, but it's not a traditional approach."

Ubi has avoided billing *Dark Messiah* as even an action-RPG, although given the series' almost self-deprecatingly straightforward title, it's hard not to see the game's approach as a logical extension. Still broadly a firstperson, combat-focused dungeon crawl, its major departure – which both developer and publisher hope is a matter of acceptance, not contention – is that your character's skill, perception, wits and luck rely on the player, not a dice roll. "I think it's time to evolve, to stop emulating the pen-and-paper RPGs," explains Colantonio. "My ideal RPG would be almost like dreaming – I'm grabbing a sword, making my decisions, the world is responding to what I do – not saying: 'OK, I'm trying to open the door, so throw your dice and tell me if it opens'. That's a valid style of game, but it's not the only way to do an RPG. I want players to forget about all those things, to break the screen between you and the character."

In motion, *Dark Messiah* can't help but suggest its influences, with *Ultima Underworld*'s claustrophobia (even in sight of an immense blue sky) and a *Thief*-like tonal ambient score, but with a character of its own that isn't overwhelmed by the comparisons. At every turn of the areas we're shown, Source physics and Looking Glass design legacy suggest a web of 'what if?' moments without ever popping a multiple-choice question box. "If the player can find some way to surprise us, then we've won," Colantonio figures. With the enemy AI equally capable of toppling or hefting environmental features, in addition to holding their own racial grudges that flare when monsters cross paths, moment-to-moment play must prove unpredictable for the creators, too. "That's the flipside of this philosophy," admits Colantonio. His lead designer smiles wearily at this.

Central to the game is its firstperson melee combat system, a feature that action-RPG and pure action titles alike have struggled to instill with the punch and precision that the perspective brought to gunfights. It's proved enough of a sticking point for many to avoid it altogether, as Colantonio was reminded: "There was a really talented designer, who I won't name – it's not Randy Smith, by the way [laughs] – I asked his opinion on firstperson

combat, and he said: 'You know what the answer is? Go thirdperson'. Which was pretty depressing. We spent months working on it, and what initially seemed to be a constraint became an advantage – because firstperson isn't just a point of view, it changes the entire feeling of your actions, and there's so much more contact."

So *Dark Messiah* refuses to break perspective, following every spar of metal against metal and jolting impact with unblinking concentration. "Obviously other games have done it, like *Riddick*," Colantonio says, "and even going back to *Ultima Underworld* there was firstperson slashing, but it was all very statistics-based, and the same with *The Elder Scrolls* – combat was never the focus of those games. We went in trying not to look at firstperson combat as a curse, but to make something sexy and visceral out of it, that you're really hitting these guys" – he begins to act out the motions and we instinctively raise a block – "and that they can grab you, and throw you away. That's given it a lot of energy."

That much is apparent as torsos are heftily kicked, shields battered and blades clashed, although it'll take more time with the system to discover if it fulfils Colantonio's intention of bringing some novelty to combat beyond 'slash, slash, slash, wait for the right time, big slash'. Even a routine of goading opponents to exhaustion before pressing in with a shield-sundering (or neck-sundering) lunge may be enough, such is the sense of impact.

Four weapon sets – swords, daggers, staves and bows – are available, with magic as a fifth method of combat, and each has speciality moves – some learned, others context-sensitive. Though there are broad warrior, wizard and assassin play styles, supported by equipment choice and the game's structure, these aren't communicated as fixed classes – players can master one, or dabble in them all. This adaptability softens the blow that M&M has disbanded its traditional adventuring party, at least in *Dark Messiah*. "The thing about party-based games is that it's like controlling one character with many strengths. But if you only have one guy, you make tradeoffs as you progress, and the compromises have a lot more impact than in a party-based game," Colantonio feels. "Plus it's a more zoomed-in experience – it's scarier entering the crypts on your own than with four friends and a pet dragon in the back."

"IF YOU ONLY HAVE ONE GUY, YOU MAKE TRADEOFFS AS YOU PROGRESS. IT'S SCARIER ENTERING THE CRYPTS ON YOUR OWN THAN WITH FOUR FRIENDS AND A PET DRAGON"

Despite the game more than acquitting itself from charges of being an unnecessarily branded side-step, there's a question of whether this is the studio's game, or just a game it's capable of creating. Colantonio is besotted with the complexities evident in the likes of *Ultima VII*, complexities which few games in the decade since its release have matched: is a fantasy combat title, however deep and sincere, really enough for him?

"*Arx* was an experiment, a way to express ourselves in a genre that we really wanted to make, and now we've had that release," he says. "There's a common ground to all these games, and you can still convey the richness the complex RPGs draw from in a more accessible game – it'll appear as background layers, but it's still there. It's only the way people play that's different, from [leans back in chair] with your coffee or cigarette in one hand and clicking with the other, to [hunches forward] being totally focused on it. Sales will tell – but so far, on a purely team level, we're very happy with what we have."

So too, it seems, is *M&M*'s original creator. Though Jon Van Caneghem has no direct involvement in *Dark Messiah*, Colantonio has inevitably met him. "By accident," he laughs. "I ended up having dinner with him in Austin, and he liked what he saw of the game." Barring some less fortunate accidents befalling production in the next six months, that's an optimism it's hard not to share.

Arkane hopes to offer multiple paths through each area, with the more precarious options benefiting from the lower-body awareness that *Half-Life 2* itself lacked

SO YOU WANT TO BE A HERO

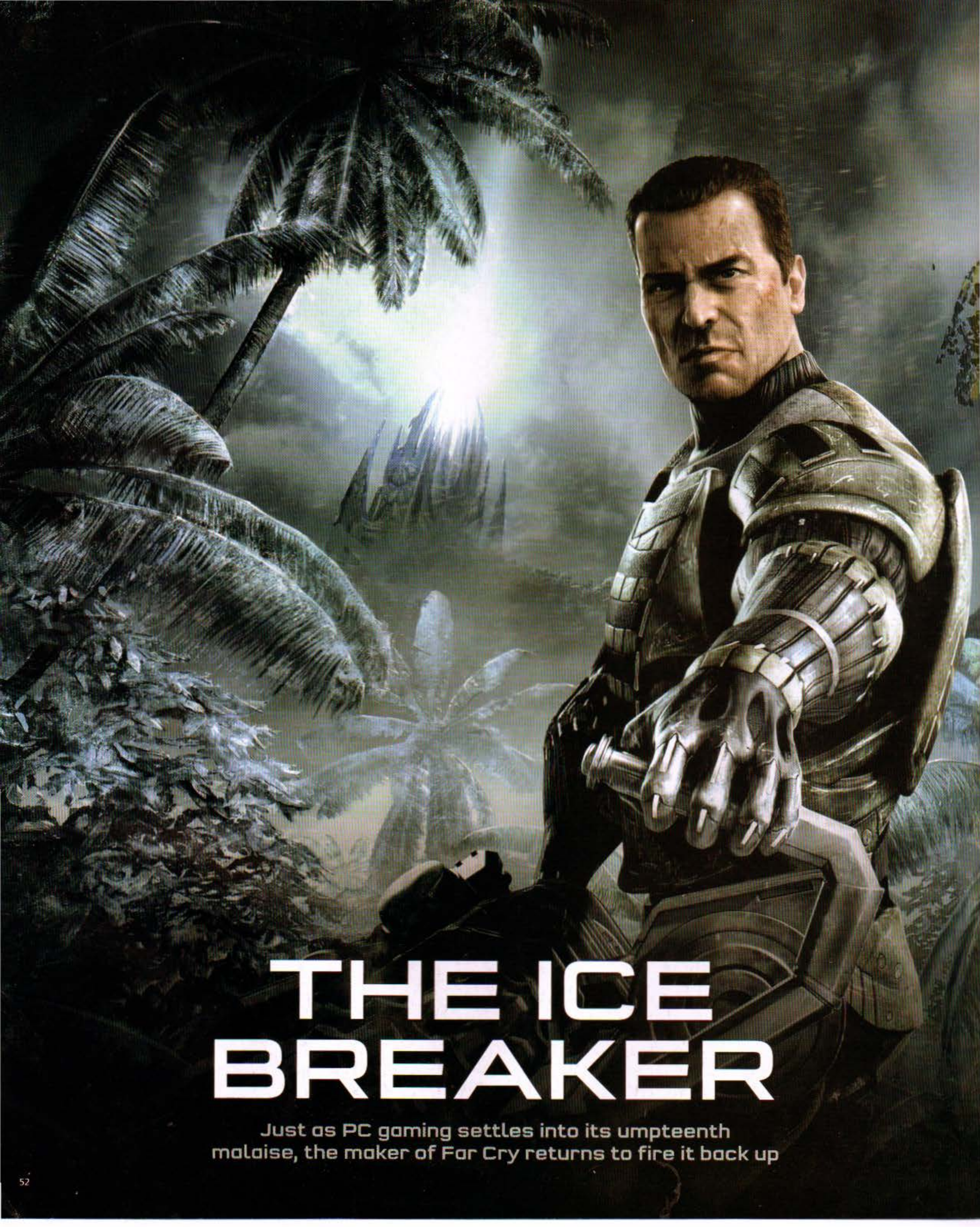
Accompanying *Dark Messiah*, Russian strategy house Nival is developing the fifth entry in the *Heroes Of Might And Magic* strategy series, also set in Ashan. "We're all part of Ashan – Ubi is leading it, as they're in between the projects, so they tell us what would match the Nival style, and vice versa," Colantonio explains. *Dark Messiah* begins 20 years after *Heroes V*, but knowledge of that game won't be required. "The difference is that *Heroes V* is a continuation of what's gone before." The *Heroes* community's response to a recent beta test saw the game delayed for balancing, as per their demands.

THE CRUSADES IN ENGLAND

While Arkane focuses on the singleplayer campaign, the multiplayer Crusade mode has been under development since mid-2005 at Kuju. Human and undead factions will clash in a tug-of-war over five maps, with the victorious side in each battle pushing towards their enemy's home territory. Each faction has five classes – three lifted directly from *Dark Messiah*'s singleplayer (warrior, wizard and assassin), and two unique to the Crusade: the archer (sniper) and priest (medic). Crusade characters will be persistent, and gain upgrades for successful service.

The blades-swinging, spells-blazing approach will only get players so far: managing your enemies is key, from stealthy kills to flinging fireballs into combustible scenery rather than at a heavily armoured guard

Raphael Colantonio (above) has assembled something of a dream team for *Dark Messiah* drafting in *Half-Life 2* art director Viktor Antonov and *Thief* series designer Randy Smith



THE ICE BREAKER

Just as PC gaming settles into its umpteenth malaise, the maker of Far Cry returns to fire it back up



Since the most effective way to learn escapology is to find yourself trapped, it's little wonder that Crytek has mastered the art. Lifelong confinement to the town of Coburg in central Germany has given the family-run developer, specifically founder and designer **Cevat Yerli**, a craving for departure: to press junkets the world over, to a fictitious island paradise of unparalleled adventure, and away from the mud that keeps PC gaming stuck in its ways. In case there's doubt regarding the company's post-*Far Cry* standing, ask yourself this: what's foremost in Microsoft's push to establish Windows Vista as gaming's ideal platform? Some clues: it isn't *Halo 2*, it isn't John Carmack.

That Crytek's latest, a sci-fi shooter entitled *Crysis*, has bagged the attention of EA as a publisher seems incidental in comparison. But the game's gravity for both the PC market and potentially beyond is such that the publishing giant dare not lay a finger on either its content or methodology, and there's plenty significant about that. *Crysis* is what marketing departments refer to as a blue-sky product – a package so densely featured and immediately progressive as to overwhelm its intended audience before the spin doctors can even muster breath.

"Someone from EA US contacted us around December 2003," Yerli recalls, "just chatting about a concept I was playing around with at the time called











One of several technical conventions that Crytek is keen to put to rest is the manner in which fire and smoke effects are rendered. CryEngine 2 can create flames that lick around intricate shapes glitch-free





KOREA DECISIONS

To maximise the suggestion of threat from its alien invaders, Crytek wanted *Crysis* to bring together two human factions that would never otherwise cooperate, namely the US and North Korea. The game's story is said to be packed to the gills with conspiracy, deception and revelation, with hero Jake Dunn himself hiding a past that's gifted him with a fearless demeanour. Rather than the segmented episodes of *Far Cry*, known among the team as 'bubbles', here the story is a unified dynamic path in which even major characters can die and affect subsequent events, leading to many split-second dilemmas. An example we're given is of a point where you must choose between saving a Korean journalist (who can then fill in backstory about the alien mothership), or a soldier who can assist you in action.

it no contextual requirements and made it possible anywhere. I know plenty of people who've completed the game and never used the traps system.

"Overall, however, I think they did a very good job. Personally, I think it's better than *Halo*, itself a great product. But I think they could have kept the quintessence of *Far Cry* and instead they lost it."

Yerli's principles are notably strong, derived in part from a development hobby that lured him from the football pitches of his youth to the keyboards of the Commodore 64 and Amstrad (known in Germany as Schneider) CPC 6128. His first title to be adopted by a professional body was a tycoon game coded at the age of 12, soon to be followed by a motion-captured kickboxing game developed on Commodore's Amiga. He was 15 when he started that, together with brothers Faruk and Avni who now share responsibility over Crytek (see 'Yerli risers'). The touchstone of his ongoing philosophy would sound vacuous coming from almost anyone else.

"Developers that really want to be successful rather than cloning and imitating need to differentiate themselves. And we're all about making big differences. That's what I've been saying to the guys for five years: make a difference, make a difference, *make a difference*. That's what it's all about."

And that, even more than in the exciting *Quake Wars* we previewed last month, is the mark of *Crysis*. Its feature list isn't only different, but in a conceptual realm that entirely befits the team's position on the advisory board for DirectX 10. As a product of CryEngine 2 (first demoed by Microsoft at last year's Professional Developers Conference), it juggles, nay, *incorporates* a dizzying selection of convincingly next-generation concepts. Ten-pass pixel shading (from bump, normal and specular maps to the less-familiar dirt maps), procedural character generation, pixel-specific soft particle accuracy, the complete eradication of clipping, ubiquitous self-shadowing encompassing translucent and backlit objects: all examples.

One thing Yerli's acutely aware of is the danger of tunnel-vision, specifically that suffered by developers who enjoy little beyond creating and, importantly, *playing* games. "Life at Crytek," he attests, "is not about playing many games, not about living the life. There's a need to understand the life outside – that of movies, books, current affairs and television. If you look at people who are only experienced at playing games – games which are iterations of iterations – they will only ever bring in further iterations.

"I would say it's primarily a question of mixing in fresh talents, people who never did a game before. We try and keep a 70/30 per cent ratio of people with and without experience, so that







Fully aware of the benefits that HDR effects provide, the team has put considerable effort into replicating precise traits of the human eye. Previous efforts such as the *HL2: The Lost Coast* project and *Far Cry's* own patches are said to use unreliable averaging to determine light levels, which *Crysis* overcomes



Crysis' transitions from one act and visual theme to the next will hopefully yield better results than its spiritual predecessor's descent (in more ways than one) into dark interiors. The team is acutely aware of *Far Cry's* failings



"*Crysis* has more technology in one head," declares Yerli, "than any other game has in total." The models here feature such novel traits as semi-transparent cartilage, self-shadowing eyes and haemoglobin maps

people see things in new ways. When we do play games ourselves, they're rarely shooters beyond the reference titles, and developers generally tend to enjoy the opposite of what they make." His own vice, he admits, has always been *Civilization*, and not even *Crysis* development is safe from the occasional 'days off' it demands.

What that staunch advancement ethic means for us is that come next year, when the blueprint lands fully realised on shop shelves, we'll have to rejoin the upgrade trail. For a brief time it seemed that Xbox 360 and PS3 might postpone that exorbitant pleasure, but with a potential console version still unannounced beyond promising job vacancies on the company website, *Crysis* says otherwise. Rest assured, online retailers will be bookmarked, notepads will be primed and hardware wishlists drawn because, as you follow Yerli's logic through to conclusion, you realise that no other choice will exist for PC enthusiasts in the era he's imagined. Seeing the interactivity of games as being reliant upon dynamism, he's devised a path of progression for PC gaming with absolute implications. Every object in *Crysis* will cast a shadow, for example, everything will interact, and everything will exist and adapt in realtime, from weather and light cycles to vegetation. Would he have it any other way, we ask?

"One has to look at it objectively. If you look at *Far Cry* – and we were punished for this – it scales more than many games that came out afterwards. Yes, it didn't look as good on low-spec machines, but because we scaled so much and because people only saw those high-resolution screenshots, they



expected it to do so. From our side, there are two aspects to it: either we keep going and scaling across the whole range, or we set our minimum spec higher to mean the gap in quality isn't as big. Right now, *Crysis* will run on high-end PCs that you can buy in shops today – there are computers that are a year old that'll still work with the game.

"But I believe our interest will always be with tomorrow's technology, because we believe in core gameplay that's both technology independent and technology driven. Excellent games need both of those: core ideas that can be applied on any kind of technology and also ideas such as the flying in and out of clouds that requires a certain bar of technology that then defines the minimum spec. So in the future we won't be compromising gameplay to suit lower hardware requirements."

Clouds and flying, then – two casually tendered ideas that touch upon the breadth of change we're to expect. Depicting the arrival, investigation and devastating agenda of a celestial body that punches through the Earth's atmosphere before slowing to a halt above a remote island paradise, *Crysis* is a three-act game, each of which has its own distinct theme that, interestingly, informs both art and action. The first is familiar and yet quietly revolutionary, the theme being idyllic, heavily vegetated terrain and the twist being the degree to which it's interactive. Every shadow has a disguise property that changes relentlessly with the passage of clouds, or any other obstruction, before the sun or moon.

"Every shadow has a disguise property that changes with the passages of clouds before the sun"

Every single polygon of vegetation is independently affected by wind, and movement through it will part it in ways that the AI can recognise. Moreover, it's entirely destructible.

Yerli believes that the time has come for games to overcome the awkward barriers that stand between their environments and the agents within then. A comparatively simple example is that while the AI in *Far Cry* was never able to recognise huts, here it can act upon the differentiation of walls, corners, grass and so on. Deeming photorealism to be something more or less achieved (at least to the point of diminishing returns), Crytek has shifted its attention to what Yerli calls 'videorealism'. Beyond the tall claim of a world without clipping (any object that can strike your POV directly must bend around it instead), he describes a locomotion system called CCD_IK that ensures that feet will always fall rather than slide, and moreover fall perfectly on to the ground at any angle. We're shown a technical demonstration of one of the game's villains – sadly, something we're not allowed to disclose – that ably demonstrates how the CryEngine 2 sandbox is an enemy's playground as much as it is yours.

The second act introduces the story's alien nemeses, its catalyst being the shock freezing of a vast area of the gameworld as their ship reveals itself. Its visual theme is derived from that premise, while its theme for play is that of shattering. A weapon obtained at this time allows the player to turn opponents to ice – not an original concept in itself – but what happens next promises all manner of tactical offshoots. Left unattended, frozen bodies may gently tip and smash on the ground; again, the idea seems obvious but the physics involved is remarkable. But an impact upon the side of such quarry, say from a weapon, will send its shattered pieces flying outward, causing damage to anything in its path. Together with the suggestion that the environment itself can be similarly frozen and



YERLI RISERS

One notable quality to the relationship between (L-R) Avni, Faruk and Cevat Yerli is that it seems impossibly amicable. If the decorum with which they talk between themselves during our visit isn't proof enough, the continuing success of Crytek at least proves that their sharing of responsibilities yields results. In their eyes, the success is due to strong family ties, a transparent relationship in which all information is shared, and a vital lack of personal agendas. While technical director Cevat oversees design and technology work, managing director Avni keeps the company's financial operations in check. Marketing and communications duties are typically Faruk's domain, though the current partnership with EA has taken a considerable portion of that load off his shoulders. Almost all of it, he's happy to reveal.

Citing the uncanny valley principle as cause for concern, Yerli suggests that *Crysis* may have to be stepped down in fidelity before it's fully appreciable. Our concern is of Edge's gaming PC turning into a small sun upon startup

manipulated, this says much for Crytek's desire to both tell and service a stronger story than before.

In fact, Yerli is quick to identify *Far Cry*'s failings as an informant of this game's design. "The appearance of the mutants and interiors was the moment when the outsmarting game was destroyed. It wasn't a weakness so much as a mistake. The aliens in *Crysis* have to be even more intelligent than the human AI – credible and ruthless, truly an invading force." Crytek is also addressing another criticism – cloned characters – with a procedural generator that, while excluding so-called 'VIP' characters, aims to ensure that you never see two identical faces.

Act three will take you not only inside the alien mothership (where you will first see the invaders' organic rather than vehicular forms) but also to the skies around it. It was a late-night viewing of Top Gun, we're told, that inspired the aerial combat of *Crysis'* penultimate stages. The idea of dogfights not only around clouds but within and through them is something Crytek was keen to explore, and so its game now does. On a more fundamental level, all of the game's combat seeks to combine those stages of pre- and actual combat. By giving the player customisable weapons and a 'muscle-suit' with configurable attributes (speed, power, etc), it provides a toolset that can change the balance of a setpiece dramatically as it plays out. This, says Yerli, stems from a desire to create an always-customisable rather than evolving hero.

The next, somewhat inevitable revelation is that while all of the new aforementioned systems are geared primarily towards a strong singleplayer experience, *Crysis* isn't neglecting its online play. "Our deathmatch will play differently to any other out there, just because of the tactical component which is derived from the muscle-suit and weapons. It enhances the innovation of the players via their toolsets, meaning that with experience you'll have a different deathmatch at any given time. That's why we call those modes Tactical Deathmatch, Tactical Team Deathmatch and Tactical CTF – because they're always different. Then we have another mode, also new, called Power Struggle. It's CTF with objectives and a skills and economy-based tool tree. I can't explain it just yet, but even at a high level it's a pretty sophisticated style of multiplayer. We decided we had to introduce a new concept, and I think we've created something very interesting."

Never during this densely layered discussion does Yerli speak particularly of anyone else. No competitors are named beyond the vague body of 'reference titles', and, as with *Far Cry*, almost everything is in some way unique. With Carmack busy on the likes of megatexture technology, does Crytek purposefully run parallel to such advances?

"I'm so glad you mentioned the megatexture," returns Yerli, beaming. "First of all, that technology is already present in *Far Cry*. I just want to be very clear about that. It's nothing other than a texture applied to the terrain, defining material properties via colour coding. If you look on the internet, you'll find an old interview with id Software where Carmack describes the megatexture as 'something like what *Far Cry* presented'. I'm not saying he does the same thing, but its spirit was already there. Before *Far Cry*, even, similar things were present in other games.

"For us, the megatexture technology is called colour-map. Of course, the use for it has been improved now; in fact, for the next iteration we're even going to apply it at different scales. But is it fundamentally a new technology? No. Are we going to react to it? We already have it, so we'll be improving it. We never create new technology just to compete with other people. We do it for the sake of what we need to deliver our vision. So if our vision requires clouds or destructible plants, then we'll do it."

Though it stands to reason that one grand endeavour should beget another, just as one great success should beget opportunity, Crytek remains one of the industry's great enigmas. The nonchalance with which the Yerli brothers orchestrate its increasingly vast affairs – the meetings with Microsoft, the hardware sponsorship deals, liaisons with EA and the impending relocation of its offices and staff to Frankfurt – seems more uncanny the more *Crysis* establishes itself as a prospective FPS landmark. But when you experience first-hand the consistency of vision, coordination and ambition that underpins those operations, you catch a glimpse of what the industry as a whole cries out for.

"We never create technology to compete with other people, we do it in order to deliver our vision"



TEK TIPS

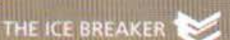
Yerli (above) is quick to impart advice for those starting out in the industry. "I would look at other platforms than PC," he says. "There are nice opportunities now through Xbox Live Arcade, for example, and in PSP development and mobile phones. To go into the games industry and make a difference with innovative gameplay concepts, you would have to go where you can make a difference with the least amount of money. You could make a game with fluid dynamics on PSP, for example, and have something truly unique. Maybe you could get a successful title launched, and then bring that across to other platforms. If I were looking at something non-commercial, however, such as getting experience in how to make games and maybe accidentally getting into the industry, then I'd get into a group and into making maps, vehicle packs or even entire mods."



Enemy units not only exhibit an advanced model of visual perception, but also a dynamic aural acuity. Both senses are adaptive, different surfaces and circumstances either dampening or sharpening the sound that the AI reacts to



With a year left until *Crysis* is finished, there's plenty of scope for these visuals to either improve yet further or scale down through optimisation. Yerli is adamant, however, that nothing will ship until he's sure it's worthy of the very highest praise



THE DIRECTX APPROACH

Besides being the primary poster-child for both DirectX 10 and Windows Vista, Crytek, or more specifically the second iteration of its CryEngine, is helping shape the technology itself. We ask Yerli what the new architecture means for the industry.

"For a developer," he reveals, "DirectX 10 offers a unified shader system – a unified language for pixel and vertex shader components. It means you don't have to really care about whether it's a vertex shader pixel or not, it's just a shader. That makes things simpler, but also requires greater management. DX10 also offers features that, in fact, we're not able to talk about. But they do provide performance benefits and especially particle performance benefits. In terms of foliage density, for example, it's centred upon having large amounts of very small objects. In that respect, it's heavily optimised and happens to be perfect for us. Apart from this, it's tightly integrated with Vista which is more powerful in its core technology, as well as allowing for greater parallelisation of data streams than DX9.

"For the consumer, DX10 means higher framerates, potentially more characters on screen, and an increase in lighting because of the unified pixel and vertex shaders. That's pretty much it, actually – higher fidelity across the board."

And what of the burning issue since the announcement of *Halo 2* on PC? Will Microsoft attempt to make *Crysis* another Vista exclusive? "No," is the instant reply, "*Crysis* is not Vista exclusive. It supports DX9 and Shader Model 2.0 for XP and up to DX10 and Shader Model 4.0 for Vista because DX10 won't be on XP. But there is DX9.L, which will be the counterpart of DX10 in XP. Even the new device driver models in Vista, which are the 'L' component in that version of DX9, have a more predictable quality in terms of texture streaming and driver speed, so we can optimise there and count on the hardware more. But the game will be a better experience on Vista because that's really a gamer's platform."

Can developers expect a considerable increase in development costs once DX10 becomes standard? "As any new technology brings more power and possibilities, it requires more content of the producer. So if you want to show off you need to create content. It depends largely on the type of games, but for the types of game that we do, it adds a lot to the budget. It's a matter of balancing opportunity, responsibility and challenges."







The tech demo shown at Microsoft's PDC in September of last year showcases many of the advanced processes that *Crysis* will employ. As remarkable as the various effects are when studied closely, it's also frightening how quickly you can take such splendour for granted






One-man revolution

Charles Cecil, maker of the Broken Sword games, explains why going it alone, Hollywood style, is the biggest adventure a game developer can undertake

There aren't many game makers who qualify for front-of-the-box status, and there are fewer still who deserve it and never get it. **Charles Cecil** is one of these. Sometimes it's hard to believe that the series widely credited for keeping adventure gaming alive isn't called *Charles Cecil's Broken Sword*, since its creator's character and enthusiasms are so clearly its hallmark. But now, Revolution Software, the studio he set up to bring the stories he imagined to life, has closed its doors, and Cecil is forging a new way for games to be made. Fresh from working as design consultant on the game of The Da Vinci Code, and deep into production on *Broken Sword: The Angel Of Death* (previewed next month), we talk to him about how making games has become an entirely new kind of adventure for him.



After 16 years and seven games, Revolution has closed its doors, and production for the new *Broken Sword* game has been taken on by Sumo. How did that come about?
The whole situation is very difficult for small studios these days. When we wrote *BS3*, I was obviously responsible for running the company, the design, driving the vision, everything really. And for six months we struggled to get the contract signed. Publishers inevitably slow the process, which means that when the six months are up, you're in a really difficult position financially and you *have* to sign, so you sign a weak deal – although actually we're very lucky with THQ; even though they're tough, they're very fair. So you'll have six months of worrying about the contract, then you'll have 18 months of preproduction and production, and then towards the end of that project you'll have the crunch period, where your input is absolutely vital. But at the *same time* you're worrying about the next project. That's the model for a small studio – a single-product studio – like Revolution, and it's extraordinarily stressful. Once you add in personnel issues, which inevitably arise, it becomes almost impossible.

On *BS3* we were really pleased with the results, because it wasn't fun to write. We had a lot of very, very good people on the team, and when we closed down the studio the morale was really very good, because people understood there was no choice. We just couldn't keep going. We left the studio open – people had their keys, they had their alarm codes, they came and went until they got another job, and then we took back their keys and deleted their codes, until there was no one left.

When we started *Broken Sword 4*, a number of those people actually came back, either on a freelance basis or working directly for Sumo. That was great, because a lot of the skills developed came flooding straight back in.

Was this transition something you'd long seen as inevitable, or were you responding to events?
I wish I could say it was pre-planned! [Laughs.] We said two years earlier that it was quite clear that making games was no longer fun, and if after a year it still wasn't fun, then we should stop. That year passed and we kept going. So really, the reason we went down this route was that if things had kept going like that, then the company wasn't going to survive. In effect, then, it was a decision made from a position of weakness. However, one of the mottos in life that really holds water is that 'in the face of adversity, look for opportunities'. And this was an opportunity, something we'd wanted to do for quite a long time.

In making those people redundant, we knew that there was really no choice, otherwise the company would go. It wasn't a hard-headed business decision, it was something we *had* to do. We had some very good staff, and most of the people got jobs straight away. It was at the time when people were starting to ramp up for the next generation, so I think pretty much everyone got snapped up. I don't think there was any hardship in that respect. Some people had been incredibly loyal – some had been with the company for over ten years – but, you know, those people had experience which, from what I can see, stood them in very good stead. And it was good for them, too, because they could branch out and do new things rather than being in the shadow of the Revolution name – and of me. Because although creating a game requires a big group of people, and to credit one person is absolutely ludicrous, that's the way it is. So this gave some very talented people the chance to do their own thing in a way they wouldn't have done if they hadn't had that situation forced upon them.

What's your working life like now?
There are two aspects to what I'm doing. One is working on full-scale projects, which I commission directly. This involves pulling together a group of collaborators and making a game together. So that's the case with *Broken Sword*, where I own the IP and I'll contract a publisher, which in this case is THQ. The other aspect is something like *The Da Vinci Code*, where I got involved right at the very beginning and my input was before The Collective came in.

In the case of my work on *The Da Vinci Code*, I spent an awful lot of time in Los Angeles, either at 2K, or at The Collective or at Sony Pictures. And now with *Broken Sword* I spend about half my time at Sumo, so I don't need an infrastructure. We closed the office about three months ago, and I now just work from home. It's ideal. If someone was to come up with the perfect job specification, then this is it. I imagine that if there are people who are running studios sitting there reading this, they'll probably be thinking: 'What a lucky bastard', because it is absolutely ideal.

"If there are people who are running studios sitting there reading this, they'll probably be thinking: 'What a lucky bastard'"

Why does it make sense for companies to bring someone like you in? How much impact can you have as a consultant?
What's interesting about it is that for relatively little output they can start the clock ticking. I can start doing the design work, I can start talking to the studios, I can start researching, and instead of having to pay a whole studio to ramp up, you've got one person. You get paid as a consultant, so it's quite well paid, but it actually works incredibly efficiently. This means that when the team get involved, there is already a structure they can get stuck into. And they can attack that structure, quite legitimately, and change it – which is something The Collective did – but there is still a structure there. You're not starting with a blank piece of paper, and that means that when they bring the team in there's already a focus, which really helps. Often the hardest part of the process – or one of the hardest parts – is how you get started, especially when you're looking to tell a story that's within somebody else's story, without turning it into 'just another' FPS.

After a few years of high-profile closures, the whole notion of Britsoft has taken a bit of a knock, and at the same time the rise of development across continents has substantially increased. Is the idea of Britsoft irrelevant now?
A really interesting thing on the *Broken Sword* project has been the Game Republic idea, an affiliation of game companies in the north east of England, which work together to create an environment in which the game industry can flourish. It was this that really helped me get to know Sumo. I knew them already, of course, but when you sit down with a pint, then you talk about these things properly. So the *Broken Sword* team is Sumo, myself, and freelancers. Wherever possible it really makes sense to work with freelance people who are actually local – provided they're as good as anyone worldwide – not least because they're quick to get to. I would say that *BS4* is a really good advertisement for how you can pull together people locally. It's obviously great for the region, because it's also encouraging work of different categories and disciplines locally, and it works because we have a great train service, so I can get down to Sheffield in 40 minutes, to Leeds in 20 minutes, and all without having to worry about the overheads of running an office. It really is very easy for me to get up early and go and see these people and work with them like I was in-house. So at Sumo I have a desk, a network connection, printer access and everything. I could almost be an employee!

But, that said, all the decisions are made by Americans now. The publishers are all American – the big ones, that is. Bless Eidos – I really wish them and the other smaller companies well, but the big companies are American now, and the decisions get made there. So you have to go there. As long as you have a big enough profile over there, there's no reason why you shouldn't live outside of America, but I think there's a big shift. Americans used to be very happy for decisions to be made by their European subsidiaries, but not any more. When it comes to commissioning products, and the really important decisions, the amount of autonomy the European offices have seems to have diminished a lot over the years. Saying that, with things like marketing, the US companies have realised that this does need to be driven from within the territory, so more power has been given locally. But it's clear: videogames are so expensive to commission nowadays that a company lives and dies on its commissioning process. So in many ways you can understand that a company wants as many of its best people as possible in on the commissioning decisions. And let's face it, it's a damn sight easier to say no and pass on something that might be successful than to say yes and then pay an awful lot of money for a game that then fails.

This pattern adds up to quite a radical new take on the hallowed 'Hollywood model', which the industry has been chasing for years: in essence, internationally mobile, freelance creators working with pockets of well-connected local development communities. What impact does it have when everyone is working freelance?
There are some benefits to it that aren't talked about all that often. We had some really talented guys on *Broken Sword 3*, but the relationship between the employer and the employee is such that you're bound to have some sort of tension – just because of the laws and how they stand at the moment. Even in a studio of 30 people, there are always going to be a few who realise what a strong position an employee is in these days, and they're going to abuse that position. At Revolution we had a few of those people.



Photography: Martin Thompson



An adventurous life: selected cuts from the Cecil CV

Charles Cecil has been making games for a quarter of a century, starting in his student days with 8bit text adventures *Inca Curse* (1981), *Ship Of Doom* (1982) and *Espionage Island* (1982), which – in a system more modern series should consider – were presented under the headers Adventure 'A', 'B' and 'C'. These led to a position as director of adventure specialist Artic Computing, which Cecil held until his graduation. Taking advantage of his experience, he founded Paragon Programming, whose close relationship with US Gold was behind his move to the latter company in 1987. It wasn't to be an easy transition: "At that time, the number one was marketing – they were top dogs. Then came sales, then came administration, then came development, which was a grand total of two people, me and a tester. So when Rod Cousens approached me from Activision, his big carrot was to say: 'I think development should lead everything', so suddenly from being in a marketing-led company, US Gold, I was in a development-led company. And I like to think the quality of the products shot up. Because that's the secret of being a good publisher: ultimately you've got to be product led." After two years managing the company's European development studios he left to set up Revolution, which established its reputation with *Lure Of The Temptress* and *Beneath A Steel Sky* before launching the *Broken Sword* series, interspersed with more run-of-the-mill porting work like *A Bug's Life* and *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*.



Beneath A Steel Sky (1994)


In Cold Blood (2000)


Broken Sword: The Shadow Of The Templars (1996)


Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon (2003)


Lure Of The Temptress (1992)


Broken Sword 2: The Broken Mirror (1997)


Broken Sword: The Angel Of Death (2006)

The really nice thing about pulling together as freelance partners, though, is that everyone is continuing to sell themselves to each other. In the employee/employer relationship, the employee sells themselves to the employer until they've got a job, and then it really doesn't matter so much. They've got a foot in the door, and that's that. With the relationships we've got now, there's much more respect, because, while we all hope to continue to work together, at the end of the project no one has any obligations. What I've found is that there's a real mutual respect between these partners, and the relationship is therefore a lot more creative. And frankly, it's fun! I really don't want to criticise what went before, but this actually works a lot better. The dynamics are a lot better, and they work much better in a partnership relationship than an employee/employer relationship.

And does it make a big difference that everyone has expressly chosen that project?
Yes. One of the things that happened at the beginning of *Broken Sword 3* was that a few people made it quite clear after *Broken Sword 2* that they didn't want to work on another game in the series, and my point was: 'Why on Earth did you come to work at Revolution?' One of them simply said: "I wanted a job so I came here, but I'd much rather work on something that wasn't an adventure." And you know, that would never, ever happen with this new system – although, of course, more fool me for employing them in the first place. I'm really sympathetic to people who want a reliable job at a studio, but there is no job security any more, because people will lay you off if a project comes to an end. The idea of a job for life doesn't exist any more, especially in this industry.

It's clear that your side of the equation works for you, but what's in it for a studio like Sumo? Isn't it sad that studios are having to pick up other people's projects rather than working on their own ideas?
If you look at Sumo, they're primarily a work-for-hire house, and they're very, very good. They've got good technology and good project

management – they've really proved themselves in that department. And they can pick and choose their projects, because they have a good reputation – so they can balance the work that comes in, which is crucial, because clearly if you're a small studio and you have resources going unused for a month, then that's an awful lot of profit burnt.

The way I work now, we might get a project signed in three months, which would be very lucky, or six months, which is about right, or a year, or not at all. And as I have an overhead now that's nearly zero – it's incredibly low – it doesn't matter nearly so much. That puts you in a much stronger position for making a good deal. Because now I'm *also* balancing my major projects with my minor projects. It's just like Sumo but on a micro scale – I'm doing the same thing. I'd say that the single-project studio model simply doesn't work. It didn't work for Visual Sciences, it didn't work for Revolution – clearly there's something that's broken. Even within big publishers it doesn't necessarily work. Look at some of the studios that Atari own. They burn millions and millions of pounds a month – just horrible. So even for someone like Atari it clearly doesn't work. Although for someone like Ubisoft, who I really, really admire, it clearly does.

Isn't there a danger if people are working across projects, rather than focusing on one vision in the way that Revolution did, that studios will lose their individual style?

When you're working on one project, you work on it for two years, and for that time it's very insular. It's a very stressful process, and you don't get to see what's going on in the world outside. The really nice thing about working on multiple projects is that you get to see what other people are doing, and that's enormously stimulating. Clearly I take the confidentiality aspect incredibly seriously, and in certain cases you find you've got the same ideas as others, in which case you back off and let them have the idea, so that as far as possible you can't be accused of conflict of interest. Because that would destroy the whole thing. If you're seen as favouring one project over another, or worse, favouring your own project, then the whole thing just falls to bits.

This solution you've found clearly suits you and your way of working, but is it feasible for someone who's starting out now to end up in your position, especially if these new methods of production catch on?

I'm extraordinarily lucky. I wrote my very first game back in 1981, so I know a lot of people. And all the games that I've made while at Revolution, almost without exception, have been successful, so I'm in an extremely privileged position. There are only a handful of people in the industry – in development – that have the same experience that I, and a couple of other people, have. If you're a young turk and you want to get in, you're just going to have to join a studio and get stuck in, before going off and doing something on your own – in much the same way that someone like Dennis Hassabis did with Peter Molyneux, before splitting off on his own – although some might say he split off a little bit earlier than he should have done! But nevertheless, he joined a company and was credited with being a major influence in a commercially successful product and used that to start his own studio.

> "All the games I've made while at Revolution, almost without exception, have been successful, so I'm in an extremely privileged position"

But is that even the answer any more? You've already said that the single-project studio isn't sustainable nowadays.

Indeed. But I've been working with people locally who have no experience of games at all, but are very talented writers – I'm throwing ideas about with them and they're being drawn in. There's plenty of opportunity to draw people in, it's just that if somebody wants to be in the position that I'm in, then they have to have considerable experience. They can't just come straight in, which means you need the infrastructure of the studio. It's the only way to learn all the vital elements of the business, and it's only when you've learned them that you can move on.

Some people want to stay in the structured, rigid environment, because you've got a project manager telling you what to do, day in, day out – or he should be telling you – and for a lot of people that's ideal. And a lot of very bright people can rise within the studio system to be head of technology, head of art or whatever, so I'm not saying one's better. But if you chose the independent route, then you're going to need to learn your skills within the system and then pull out.

It's clear from your involvement with *The Da Vinci Code* that film tie-ins are one of the places where the model can work best. As the commercial relationships between films and games tighten, have you found that film studios are getting more savvy about what they want from a game-of-the-film?

The film studios currently have no way of knowing how good the result is going to be, and that's a really big concern. One of the interesting things about working on *The Da Vinci Code* is that I'm working directly for the publisher, and I'm also working indirectly for the film studio. So my clients are very much publisher and licence-holder driven, rather than developer driven. This means that I have a responsibility at that stage to build something that will work.

In the case of Imagine, which is Ron Howard's company [which made *The Da Vinci Code*], they knew very little about games, but they wanted to be absolutely sure that the game would come across as intelligent, as opposed to those other games which... well, which roll off the tongue and hit the headlines. Sony on the other hand are very, very switched on, because they do quite a lot of licensing, so they knew what the game should be able to deliver, they knew the developers, they knew pretty much everything. But even then there's a gap between them and the developers, so perhaps at one point there'll be a role for someone who can bridge that gap.

How do you think games are perceived now by the wider public? How many strides have they taken since you started working in the industry?

It's great to see things like games having two entries in the top ten of the [BBC's] *Culture Show's* design competition, that's fantastic. But in the sitting rooms of middle-class, middle England the attitude towards games hasn't changed one iota. And perhaps it's an emotional thing, a personal thing, but it would be nice to have the kudos that other entertainment mediums have.

Do games deserve it yet?

Probably not! Ha! As an industry, no, but as a medium, yes. And in terms of certain creative people, absolutely. But as an industry, no. Not yet.










BANG

FUN AND GAMES

A GANGSTER, A SPACE MARINE AND AN ORC WALK INTO A BAR. THE BARMAN SAYS: "WHY AREN'T GAMES FUNNIER?"

They say there are only seven stories in the world. Others, particularly those who've recently read a copy of *Viz*, say there are only seven jokes. But ask people to name funny games and you begin to feel like there are only seven possible answers. *The Secret Of Monkey Island* usually pops up first. *Sam And Max* and *Day Of The Tentacle* next. *Conker's Bad Fur Day* might get the British vote, *Leisure Suit Larry* the American. After some brow-furrowing for a more modern title – probably *The Bard's Tale* – you'll be back to where you started with *Grim Fandango*. Take Ron Gilbert and Tim Schafer out of the running, and things look pretty bleak.

It's entirely unfair, of course, to pick on games for not having much in the way of comedies. The list of great game romances is equally short, as is the list of great game tragedies (assuming you're excluding the likes of *Zelda II: The Adventure Of Link* or *Superman 64*). But the minute you widen your search from games labelled as comedies to games that make you laugh, the list explodes with delights: *Giants: Citizen Kabuto*, *Serious Sam*, *The Sims*, *Bangai-O*, *Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga*, *Parodius*, *Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee*... Nonetheless, the subject of humour and games is connected indelibly with those classic LucasArts adventures. Why were those games so funny in the first place, and why, nearly 20 years on, do they still stand as the benchmarks for game humour?

For **Ron Gilbert**, author of *Maniac Mansion* and the SCUMM engine which spawned so many subsequent adventures, the answer is straightforward: "I think the thing that drew me towards humour for adventure games is that with adventure games, if you start to take them too seriously they don't work as well. You're putting the player in this very constrained world, and they really can't run around and do everything they can in the real world – except that you're trying to pretend to them that they can. So I think humour is a good buffer to put between the player and the world. By using humour you can make it a bit more palatable that they can't do the things they can do in the real world."

And that, of course, partly explains why they've endured as such masterclasses in game humour. As that gap between what it looks like you can do and what you can actually do has lessened, so has the need for humour to offset the discrepancy.

The rest of the explanation comes from the challenge of integrating controlled comedy into the uncontrolled gameplay:

AMPLE HUMOUR



Amped 3's dedication to its humour was remarkable, with its inclusion of in-house anime, stop-motion animations, paper-doll pop pastiches and a faintly disturbing fake pin-up calendar. This ambition is rare enough at the best of times and almost unheard of for a launch title. Just how much effort did it take, how big a risk did it seem, and has it paid off? Producer **Matt Seymour** (above) talks us through what happens when you turn a sports sim into a comedy showcase.

Amped 3's humour, both in its scale and in its tone, is extremely audacious. Were you aware of that when you were making it?
Oh, absolutely. Yeah [laughs], one thing that we knew is that we wanted to have a story in it, and obviously it had to be engaging and immersive, so that was one part of the foundation. The other part of the foundation – how it became funny – was the fact that the snowboarding community is very jackass and fun-loving and always joking around. If you hang around these guys or snowboard yourself, then you know that there's a lot of playfulness to it. But our belief was that there are very few people in gaming who write good stories. They're just shite. And that's why people don't like stories. When they try to be funny and they're not good writers, then it's even worse. So the key for us at 2K Games and Indie was just making sure we had really good writing, and taking it from there. So we just bounced things off each other, very much like a sitcom group of writers. And having worked in Hollywood and with TV writers, I kinda know how to organise that and get writers motivated.

So was it a case of bringing in external people, or finding people within the team who could write well?
A little bit of both, but yes, my number one thing is to hire at least one professional writer. I usually use TV people, in these cases because they can write really short or concise stuff. Y'know, if you start with novelists or non-fiction writers and so on, the punchiness is not there as naturally. But in this case Aaron Conners was the chief story producer. He was also the chief writer on all the *Tex Murphy* games, so there's some legacy there. Then there were about three of the lead artists who lent gags and schticks. In fact, they are the same artists that did a lot of the sock puppets and anime and that kind of stuff, so they were very much involved all the way through.

How did the rest of the team and your publishers respond to you focusing so much effort on making the game funny?
Oh, it was a huge fight, especially the anime stuff, because that's really labour-intensive. I mean, the whole idea behind that was such a big thing for me, because my vision was to have these eclectic and diverse types of presentations. Kids these days, and myself, well, we watch television in spurts and we switch from the shopping channel to the news, to cartoons to drama, to sports, all within the span of an hour. That was my big bold vision – to give that kind of experience, knowing that it would motivate the player through the story, which obviously succeeded. Then you put humour on top of all of that, and then you've got 'em...

Did you see the humour as something that would help you market the game?
I thought it would, um, but it didn't. And that was a real eye-opener. The main thing as a game designer is to get people into the game, to stay in the game and have a fricking good time. And then obviously, plan two, especially when you have marketers up your arse, is how you can use this stuff to market this? What happened was that it takes you a while to get into the game, to understand the wackiness, to see the diversity. On the PR tour I'd demo this game, and there's only so far I could go, y'know. So people would just see one or two examples of how we were going crazy, but they wouldn't understand just how nuts we went. And so it takes reviewers and the public and everybody quite a bit of time before we'd grabbed them by the genitals – if you will. It's because of that, that the marketing was really difficult. And then when you show like stills of sock puppets, people are like, 'Uhhh, I don't get it', y'know, or stills of anime or hand puppets or all this stuff we were doing. It just doesn't read on print advertising or whatever.

The humour in the game has a very particular tone. Were you worried about alienting people who didn't get it, or simply didn't like it?
Absolutely not. Honestly, we couldn't worry about it. If we got into stuff that was overtly racist or sexist, that kind of stuff, y'know, we would obviously back down, but you have to go there. And then on that kind of stuff we'd pull back. But overall we just said 'Fuck 'em', y'know, because you can't start wheeling it in before you get it out there. You've got to go all out. And people, our viewers, your readers, they're really bright people, and they know when you're bullshitting them, when you're pandering to them. Then it would've just flopped and fallen on its face immediately.

Plus we're *the* legit snowboarding game, as opposed to *SSX*, and we couldn't be called out as posers by the community. The snowboarders that are going to give us their blessing may be the minority of the people who play this game, but they're a very vocal minority, very shrewd, and we couldn't afford to alienate them.
Continued >

it simply isn't as easy as it looks. "They underestimate the work that goes into humour," laments Gilbert of today's game makers, "because the most important thing about humour is timing. If you ask any comedian, they'll tell you that. Humour is about building expectation, and not giving the outcome people were expecting. The problem with games is that you've taken timing away from the author and given it to the player, so in order to do comedy, you can't use a lot of the same techniques that linear artists are used to using in comedy, because they can't use timing. The reason a lot of stuff comes off flat in games, therefore, is not because that particular thing wasn't funny, but because it happened at the wrong time. I think adventure games coped a bit better because they are much slower. Plus, because they were games that were inherently about a narrative, players were a bit more willing to be led around by the story."

And that, in a nutshell, is the secret behind the durability of LucasArts' adventures: they had a need and a capacity for humour which skilled writers like Gilbert and Schafer could take best advantage of.

Gilbert's use of the word 'linear' is a sound choice. This is game humour at its most traditional, using dialogue and wordplay, set-ups and pay-offs, much as a traditional film or

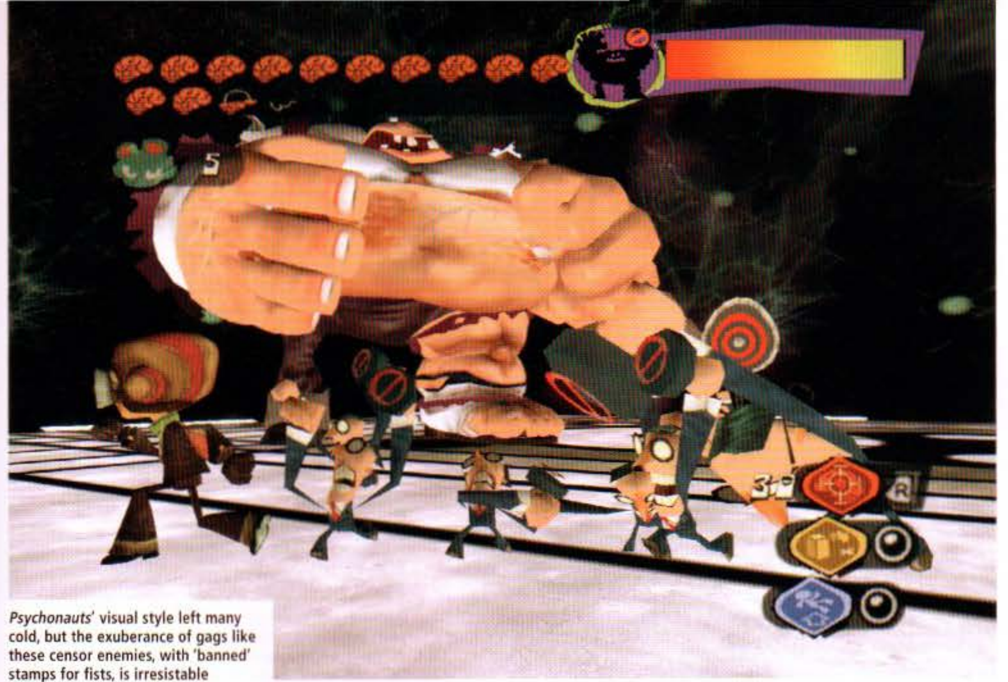
The style of *Amped 3*'s spoofs and handmade animations runs the gamut











Psychonauts' visual style left many cold, but the exuberance of gags like these censor enemies, with 'banned' stamps for fists, is irresistable

TV comedy would. But while it may be borrowing techniques from more established media, gaming has found a rich seam of its own, courtesy of one of its oldest limitations. The lack of recorded dialogue, either due to technical restrictions or prohibitive costs – and indeed, the often dismal quality when it is present – have left games reliant on subtitles, which provide an open playing field for gaming's greatest self-indulgence: the pun.

Oddly, this is something that's as endemic in well-translated Japanese games as western ones, whether it's Mr Gency's Exit in *Disgaea* or Raz's Basic Braining in *Psychonauts*. Games with a sense of humour rarely miss the chance to pound out some puns, often taking full advantage of the pacing and clarity that words you can see as well as hear can bring to a gag. *Paper Mario: The Thousand Year Door* is the strongest example, with textual treats littered around the game, not least Luigi's drawn-out parodies of his own fantasy adventures. Knowing and sophisticated, it holds its own against those earlier adventures.

What all these games share is that, for the purposes of their humour, the player becomes the audience. The funny moments are the moments when you sit back from the game, ready to read, hear or note whatever laugh the game maker has in store for you. Whether it's a Raiden poster tucked away in *Metal Gear Solid: Snake Eater*, or Tommy Vercetti biting his tongue at the lunacy of Love Fist, these are moments which, precisely because of the concerns Gilbert outlines about controlling timing and building expectations, require no input from the player. And while they can be enormously entertaining, it's hard not to feel that gaming should be capable of more. If what sets games apart is interactivity, shouldn't their humour be interactive too? What happens if instead of a passive observer the player becomes a participant?

Interestingly, games that take advantage of the player's presence as an unknowing stooge don't necessarily need to lose any control or sacrifice any expectations. *Snake Eater* again points the way: save and quit while fighting The End, set your PS2's clock forward a year or two, return, and you'll find that in your absence The End has died. It's a joke which hinges on the player's active involvement, much as some of the shlockier insanity effects in *Eternal Darkness* did. They may have substantially undermined the game's ability to genuinely unsettle the player, but the moments when a limb dropped off with every step you took, or you found yourself inexplicably wandering around on the ceiling, were only funny because they were happening within the normal interactivity of the game, rather than in a cutscene.

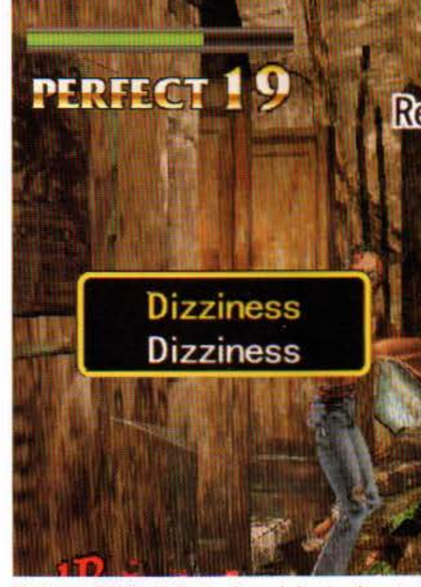
But these are still scripted moments: pre-planned, tightly controlled and often only funny the first time they happen. And since

THE RELIANCE ON SUBTITLES LEAVES AN OPEN PLAYING FIELD FOR GAMING'S GREATEST SELF-INDULGENCE: THE PUN

Stubbs The Zombie takes the *Halo* engine's capacity for comedy and makes a game out of it, helped by a satirical story and witty soundtrack

games aren't linear experiences, instead subject to the rewinds and repetitions of restarts and repeated playthroughs, they need to find a nonlinear way to do jokes if their funniness is to find a shape of its own.

It's *Halo* that offers the first clue, not least in that it introduced most gamers to the idea of emergent gameplay: combat situations that weren't prescripted but arose organically – and unpredictably – from a set of variables. It's a facet of the game that's evident from your earliest encounters with a pack of grunts, as they seek out cover, flee grenades and inch round behind you. But those grunts also serve to illustrate something that seems very much at odds with *Halo*'s sombre space-opera script. The grunts are simply *funny*. Their helium squeals and floppy wobbles make them inherently ridiculous. Place them in a low-gravity environment and give the player a supply of sticky grenades, and it becomes readily apparent that the game wants you to play it for laughs as much as for kills. It's a tactic exploited to the full by *Metal Arms*, which gives robot-hero Glitch an arsenal which seems as much geared towards slapstick as destruction. It's one thing to watch in satisfaction as an enemy bot shrieks in panic after being peppered with explosive studs; quite another to plan ahead so that you've sliced off his legs before he tries to flee. Ultimately, the jokes you end up causing as you go about your proper business of



The lunacy of *Typing Of The Dead*'s vocabulary is only part of its humour. Its cutscenes, delivered like a particularly po-faced X-Files episode, feature heroes with Dreamcasts strapped to their backs, keyboards slung in front like trays

running and gunning are funnier and more immediate than those scripted into the cutscenes that frame the story.

It's an incredibly exciting trend for gaming to be taking – surrounding the player with the components of humour and trusting that his actions will be enough to assemble them into jokes. It also guarantees that each one remains subtley fresh, so that no matter how many times you play through the game, each gag that emerges will be formed from a unique combination. It also guarantees the timing, since that grows inherently out of the characteristics of the components. Bungie's designers don't have to worry about pacing the punchlines of a grunt brawl, for example – the grenade fuse will do it for them.

So what does Gilbert, the master of the scripted joke, make of this trend for unscripted gags? "Well, I think that if there's any creative or artistic avenue to explore, then that's it. I think games have spent a lot of time trying to be movies, but the thing about games is that they're organic, that players can hopefully to do whatever they want, and if you can work humour into that, then that's great." But despite the huge enjoyment that can be gleaned from this kind of procedural comedy, whether it's the explosive violence of *Metal Arms* or the cute chaos of *Yoshi's Island*,



It never occured to Ron Gilbert not to make the games he wrote funny, but injecting the level of personality found in his games into modern projects is much harder now that team sizes – and budgets – have grown so much larger



There's linear game humour in *Katamari Damacy*, of course, in the King of All Cosmos' dialogue, but much of the comedy comes from the bizarre juxtapositions and noise combinations you create as you go with your glueball



there's no escaping the fact that, for now and for the foreseeable future, it's a one-trick pony: one way or another, it's all just slapstick, and, as Gilbert warns: "At some point we're going to get bored of throwing pies."

So if scripted humour – where the player is the audience – is fraught with difficulties, and unscripted humour – where the player is the straight man – is in an endless parade of pie-fights, is there any scope for comedy in games to evolve? One shift comes as games reach the other end of the spectrum that Gilbert was originally struggling with. Whereas in

THE ASPECT OF THE SIMS THAT'S COPIED LEAST IS THE ONE HIGHEST ON THE LIST OF THOSE WHO ENJOYED IT: HUMOUR

Monkey Island humour was necessary to bridge the reality gap, in modern games it's increasingly a product of how much that reality gap is shrinking. But this isn't humour that the developers have included for the players, it's humour the players are having at the expense of the developers.

In *Half-Life*, the freedom a player was given during what would ordinarily have been cutscenes was a tool for increasing your sense of immersion. In the sequel, the fidelity of the world Freeman inhabited turned those moments into irresistible opportunities for larking around. One look at Alyx's solemn frown was enough to turn many players from the straightest of straight men to the most self-indulgent of clowns, piling up box barricades and tossing around cans of paint. Or take the current graphical cutting edge: *Fight Night Round 3*. It may be a new benchmark of sports simulation, but hold down block, waggle the right stick and the resulting manic body-popping renders months of painstaking development ridiculous.

It's a subversive trend – of the player as prankster – which machinima abuses to the full. From the gentle ridicule of Jim Monroe's holiday tour of *Liberty City*, to the officially sanctioned camp of Red Vs Blue's *God Of War* promos, the majority of machinima hinges on mining the comic potential of what happens when players kick over the traces. So is this the future of game humour? Are we seeing a shift towards a time where there aren't any funny games, only funny players? Do

AMPLE HUMOUR (CONT'D)

The game – with its story of developers trapped on a Zeppelin by a crazed producer, forced to make soulless games for 'Colonotronic Arts' – is pretty satirical. Did you worry about this?
Oh, that stuff, oh, that, I see what you're referring to. Well, that's... uh, yeah, we just couldn't help ourselves [laughs]. I've been in the industry for over 15 years, Aaron Conners has been in it just about as long, and again we were sort of the driving force, so it just goes to show that we're a couple of cantankerous bastards, y'know. We finally have this canvas to take a couple of shots at the industry.

Why do you think games are so hesitant about doing this kind of thing? Is it just because it's really difficult, or is it because developers have underestimated the savvy and cultural references that their audience has?
Both, it's absolutely both. It is really hard and... um... right, you answered your own question. Also, you need... I can't tell you how much I fought for almost every joke, because I had a load of people on the team just shrugging their shoulders and going 'I don't get it'. I just had blank faces for months and months and months. They would just come down and say, 'I don't get it, I don't see how it all fits together and I don't think the player will', and eventually I stopped trying and just said, 'You gotta trust me'. And at the end, everyone's like, 'Aaah, OK, I get it'. So you really need somebody that's driven like that, like myself or – not to compare myself with Tim Schafer – but people like that who are going to drive it home through thick and thin.

Was there any bad feeling on the team, when the programmers were stuck on some tough problem and the artists next door were doing something that must have seemed pretty self-indulgent, like setting fire to Barbie dolls?
[Laughs.] Yeah, there was a lot of self-indulgence, but that's the nature of any collaborative entertainment effort. But, yeah, there was grumbling – you have to say to the engineers: 'You studied maths, you don't get to write and be funny, you get to write code for physics'. But I had artists who didn't get it, too. As I said, it was a small group who pushed it through.

Continued >

AMPLE HUMOUR (CONT'D)

What proportion of the overall development effort went into the humour of *Amped 3*?
Uhhh, well, if you want me to put a percentage on it, that's tricky. It was high, because of all the VO, the music... I'd say effort-wise, it's somewhere between 30 and 45 per cent of the overall development.

Looking forward to future projects after setting the bar so high, with the level of inventiveness and effort put in, that must be quite a daunting thing to face now – or have you got some stuff that you didn't use that you can't wait to get cracking again?
Yeah, it's the latter more so. When you're done, and you're facing the future, you're like, 'I'm spent, I don't have it in me any more', but y'know, you have a few pints and months go by and you sit down with the same crew, for the most part, and it's amazing what pops out. That's why in the industry people say, 'Ohhh, I came up with this design and I bet someone stole that from me when I mentioned it'. What I tell my designers is that you'd better have more than just one thing. I mean, we just churn stuff out, and it gets stolen. That's OK and we'll come up with something else, and then that kinda goes along with this whole vision that we had on this. I was worried for a while, but I sat down with the guys – probably about a month, month and a half – and we'd taken time off and had a holiday, and it was kinda stale, but then I took them to go and have some pints and BOOM, then people started barfing and lo and behold there was a nice little jewel in the barf and we pulled it out and started polishing it, and that's gonna be where we're going next.

What do you think the videogame industry loses by not prioritising humour more? Do you think it's missing out on potential players?
I do. It's part of the total wimpiness of the games industry, right. There's all these RTSes and FPSes, and everyone and his mother has a mage in *WarCraft*, but humour is an almost totally untapped genre. Sure there were all the classics – *Sam & Max* and *Day Of The Tentacle* and all – but the adventure genre is dead now. The new challenge is to infuse humour into all these other genres, and to plead and beg and really convince those signing the cheques to let us do it.

developers face a dark future where they have to assume that the people for whom they're trying to shape an experience aren't just unpredictable but downright uncooperative? Almost certainly not: Gilbert doesn't see anything significant in this trend, beyond an expression of machinima's current limitations: "Given 30 seconds, it's going to be a lot easier to make someone laugh than to make someone cry. Comedy's a little bit easier in that respect, and people respond to it well, so I think that's all that is."

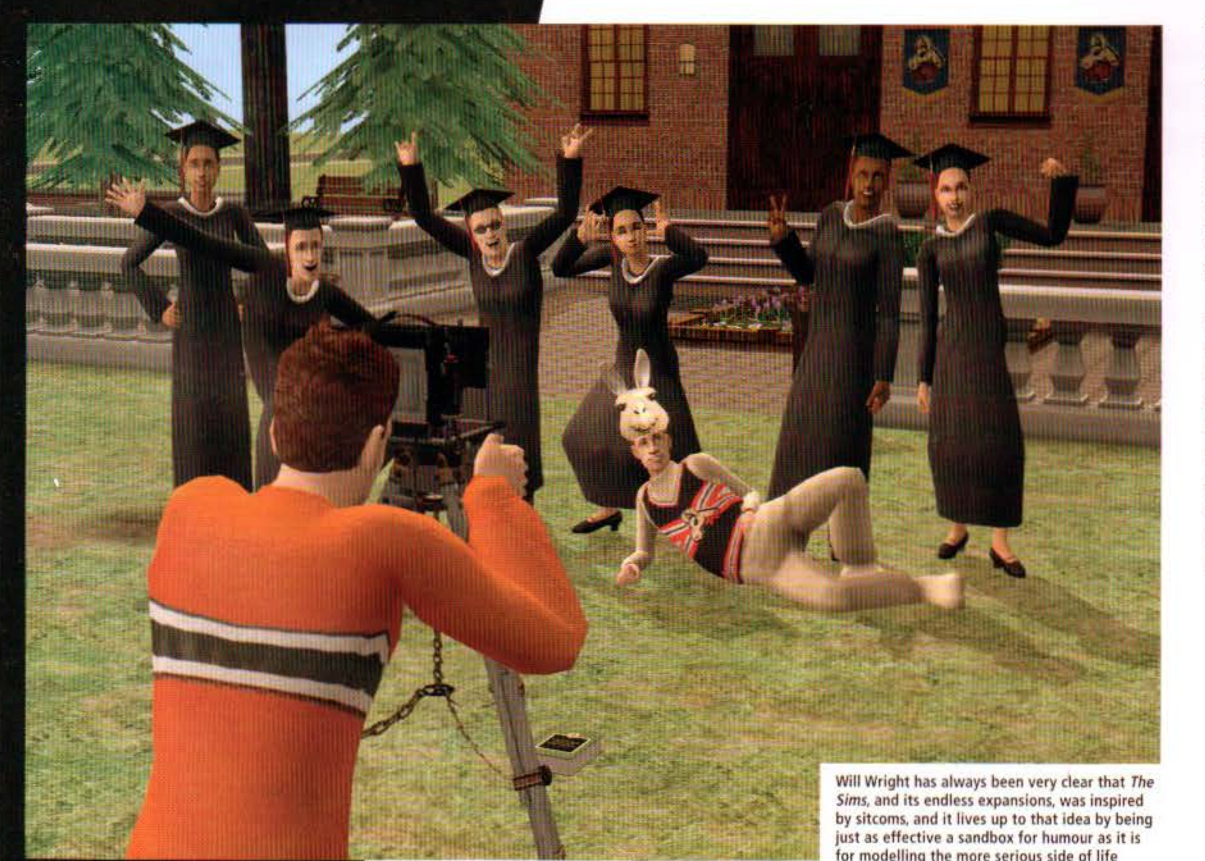
Either way, it's clear that games have avenues open to them beyond those used by 'linear' media like film, literature and TV. So why, with such a rich range of options open to them, has funniness in games become so marginalised? Well, the sad fact of the matter is that there are so few funny games, not because hardly anyone is trying to make them, but because hardly anyone is succeeding. Nearly every game made with dialogue and characters, and a few besides, try for at least a touch of humour – a wacky character, a Schwarzenegger put-down, an oh-so-punny mission title – but most underestimate just how much skill and focus must be given to comedy in order for it to work. And for those who do, their publishers are all too often anxious that humour – renowned for being a matter of personal taste – runs too big a risk of alienating too many people.



For many, Randy Glass' 'Warthog Jump' was the first piece of machinima they saw, and they first piece they laughed at. Physics as an essential component in game comedy is still a strong trend, currently best exploited by the Garry's Mod-enabled Rube Goldberg devices made in *Half-Life 2*

Was this something that ever worried Gilbert? "Yeah, I thought about that a lot. And my response was to say, 'Oh well', because I have a certain sense of humour in the things that I write and design, and if you like it you're going to love it, and if you don't, you're not." But it's clear that many modern publishers don't share that confidence (see 'Ample humour') and the result is often to dilute the humour in the hope of making it more generally palatable. This is a tactic that Gilbert sees as self-defeating: "If you try to make humour appeal to too broad a group of people, you get this bland vanilla stuff that just isn't interesting. This is because humour is about shocking people, and you've got to tread that edge. You've got to say, 'This is my humour' and go all out with it, or you just alienate people with mediocrity."

But, other than the fact that it cheats players out of a bit of bonus fun, does it matter if games that prioritise being funny are becoming marginalised? Simply put, yes. The two breakout games of the last decade, and the games that brought in new players and new interest, are *The Sims* and *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. Both have been a major source of inspiration to developers ever since, in ways that have ranged from the respectful to the borderline sue-able. But the aspect of



Will Wright has always been very clear that *The Sims*, and its endless expansions, was inspired by sitcoms, and it lives up to that idea by being just as effective a sandbox for humour as it is for modelling the more serious side of life





The more realistic the graphics, the greater the potential for humour that subverts the seriousness of the game – as *MotoGP 2* shows. *Conker's Bad Fur Day* (below) relies on its own kind of slapstick



them that has been copied least is the one that is often highest on the lists of those who've enjoyed them: the humour. Both games are generously and lastingly funny, in both their prescripted scenarios as well as in their emergent situations, and this has been a huge part of their appeal. But while almost every aspect of their dynamics, their interfaces, and their atmosphere have been plundered, few publishers seem to have stopped to consider the commercial value of their sense of humour.

For Gilbert, it's clear cut: "The problem is that games take themselves too seriously, because hardcore gamers take them very seriously. But if games *do* take themselves too seriously, then other people *don't* take them seriously at all. At the moment we have that catch 22, where the people who are going into game stores are a self-selecting group of people who are already interested in games as they are, and to make it possible for a wider range of games to be successful, then you need to branch out and get a different crowd. And I think humour is one of the best ways we can do that." And that catch 22 – alongside the failure of publishers to find ways to creatively market funny games like *The Bard's Tale*, *Psychonauts* and *Stubbs The Zombie* – means that there won't be a market for more gaming comedies until there are more of them to appeal to a wider market.

While the rewards of getting it right are clearly enormous, the risks of getting it wrong remain sobering. Even if a publisher is willing to take Gilbert's advice and go all out, *Amped 3*'s approach shows that going all out can soak up nearly half of your development effort. And at a time when many games – *Amped 3* being one of them – are still struggling to nail basic technical and design issues, could it ever be responsible to divert so much energy into something that is still seen as window dressing? But perhaps this is exactly the time – when new hardware means that dry technical ambition can become the driving focus of so many games, and that window dressing needs renewed emphasis. Games exist to entertain us, and the more ways in which they can do it, the more people they can entertain, and the more variety they can bring to those who are entertained by them, the better. After so many years of chasing the frankly demoralising grail of the 'game that makes you cry', how could it not be progress to start asking not how many bangs we can get for our buck, but how many belly laughs?

THERE ARE SO FEW FUNNY GAMES, NOT BECAUSE PEOPLE AREN'T MAKING THEM, BUT BECAUSE PEOPLE AREN'T SUCCEEDING



Planet Moon has always prioritised humour in its games, and in *Armed And Dangerous* it complemented a smart script and engaging characters with the infamous shark gun, whose effects – and funniness – are self-explanatory



Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Now playing

Fahrenheit



Regardless of its flaws, any game with ambition as furious as that of Cage's opus deserves widespread attention. Its moral playground is certainly alluring, if largely illusory.
XBOX, ATARI

Drill Dozer



It makes your Micro happy, this bright and breezy platformer that has just the right amount of new ideas, and just the right loyalty to the classic traditions of the genre.
GBA, NINTENDO

Rez



Even though your head says it belongs on Sega's Dreamcast, your eyes, your heart and your gut can't argue with the luminous slices of beauty that are still peerless.
PS2, SEGA

Killing in the name of...

Of what? Fun? Relaxation? Therapy?



Think you could live for a month as the gaming equivalent of a conscientious objector? Games like *Animal Crossing: Wild World* may see you through – just don't sell any fish to Tom Nook, or you'll end up committing piscicide-by-proxy

Here's a test. Try to get through the next month, from this issue of **Edge** to the next, without killing anything. Not a thing. And that doesn't just mean not beating policemen to death with dildos, or garrotting any gangsters with the wire from Agent 47's piano: it means without killing *anything.*

Don't think you can get round it by losing yourself in *World Of WarCraft*. Just because they're orcs and they dissolve rather than lie there bleeding doesn't mean you didn't kill them. And don't try bucking the rules with a session of *Resident Evil* – just because they're zombies doesn't mean they don't die when you shoot them in the face with a shotgun. Not even Mario can save you: what do you think happens to those innocent little goombas when a fat Italian stomps on their skulls and they pop out of existence? Goomba heaven, current population: millions.

But looking at the games lined up for review this month, you won't have an easy time of it. Of the 15 titles, two thirds will ask you to be a killer, whether it's of rebel insurgents, angry forest marshmallows or disloyal pimps. And of the five death-free games remaining, two ask you to beat your opponents unconscious – although *Fight Night: Round 3*'s split and battered flesh will give you more insight into the process than *Bleach DS*.

Nor is this an atypical month. The only fair generalisation to make of gamers is that we're people who enjoy pretending to be killers. For every car-game purist or block-puzzle obsessive there are a dozen fans of FPSes, RPGs, 'action' games (which could just as well be called 'violence' games), realtime strategy and survival horror, where killing is as much your leisure as your business.

This isn't about censorship. It's perfectly appropriate for games to use this kind of content, and perfectly healthy for people to play them. But is it healthy for it to be so overwhelmingly what games are concerned with? Can games ever expect to escape ill-founded and damaging labels like 'murder simulators' if they can't find more to focus on? And can they keep their players interested if that's all they continue to offer? Surely the time will come, perhaps much sooner than you might think, when we're all bored to death of death.









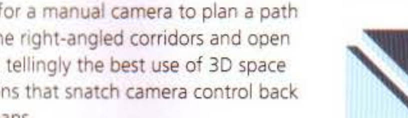
Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten

ONIMUSHA: DAWN OF DREAMS

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: ¥6,980 (£34) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), MARCH 17 (UK)
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E150, E151, E160

The question with *Shin Onimusha* was always going to be where the emphasis on that 'Shin' – 'New' – would lie. Was it to be a new take on the feudal survival-horror offshoot, or just a new game in the series' own twilight of the samurai? Perhaps inevitably, it's the latter. Without its sister *Resident Evil* title's extended development time or, as its producer admitted in last issue's preview, even the intent to truly push *Onimusha* forward, Capcom has instead broadened it as widely as the underlying game can bear.

That game slumps with a sense of uncomfortable weight into its newfound freely 3D surroundings: at first obvious in the lack of any character's ability to jump (outside of cutscenes, at least), it soon becomes apparent that as far as *Dawn Of Dreams'* mechanics are concerned, the environments could still be prerendered. Nothing can be forced aside, climbed or vaulted except at specific hotspots, and level design never truly moves beyond the familiar door-by-door progression. As such, there's no real need for a manual camera to plan a path through the right-angled corridors and open areas, and tellingly the best use of 3D space is in sections that snatch camera control back for fixed pans.



Combat fares better, though its gaudiness is chiefly a front for the same deliberate action introduced in *Onimusha 2*. The optimum attack remains the critical-hit Issen, now given a much wider window to trigger in a counterattack, as well as the nearly game-balance-tipping ability to launch at will with Oni magic. Provided a character's magic level is kept topped up with potions and blue orbs, it's possible to slingshot through most encounters on a chain of fatal blows. If that sounds unsporting, it's encouraged by the amount of enemy types that simply aren't involving to fight: airborne attackers hovering out of most characters' reach, living gun emplacements, hit-and-run bombers and creatures that are nothing more than armour-plated obstacles.

There's a way around all of these foes – even if it's literally making your way around all of them – but your AI-controlled allies are less discreet, constantly martyring themselves unless instructed to hang back or flicked to direct control. It's an unfortunate liability, as allies act believably and helpfully when facing



Dawn's Jubei Yagyu is a precocious tomboy rather than the accepted grizzled swordsman (that's her grandfather, you see), but she's a rewardingly showy playable character, fielding deaths of a hundred high-speed cuts instead of her companions' weightier blows

the less frustrating Genma ranks, finishing off downed opponents and battering crowds with enthusiastic flair. This refinement of the series' party dynamic into a dual-character system is by far *Dawn's* most convincing improvement, though again it's restricted by the game's structure. The promise of using each character's skills to access specific areas plays out as token backtracking rather than organic cooperative puzzling – walking keys

> Provided a character's magic level is kept topped up, it's possible to slingshot through most encounters on a chain of fatal blows

to be ferried to locks, then swapped out at a save point for the next.

If their personification leaves much to be desired, at least the five characters' abilities are padded to the limit of the DualShock's available inputs: each has unique movesets, special attacks and Oni transformation (though mercifully in most cases the commands are standardised). Each character also wields their own preferred arms, with scores of subtly and not-so-subtly different weapons to be collected, far in excess of the checklists of *Onimushas* past. Add to that stat-boosting accessories and a limited item-crafting system and it's clear that a sizeable amount of the game's play time lies between stages. But while all characters and their weapons have extensive upgrade paths, there's no need for thoughtful specialisation – the

A side effect of the multiple characters is that lead Soki is fairly forgettable, despite being a forced inclusion in almost every level. You're more likely to remember his swords, from one-ton claymores to butterfly-light katanas



Warrior-monk Tenkai (right) brings a hefty Oni magic meter to the field in addition to several whirling polearm moves that can be extended to ludicrous length. Any enemy that survives can be smartbombed with his ability to detonate floating souls



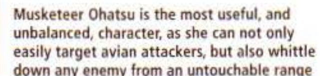






Musketeer Ohatsu is the most useful, and unbalanced, character, as she can not only easily target avian attackers, but also whittle down any enemy from an untouchable range









Only at the very conclusion does *Dawn* break out the shimmering, dreamlike style that it at first seemed the game would posses all along (above). Fist-fighting Spaniard Roberto (left) has the most divergent control scheme, requiring rhythmic combinations of punches and weaves to box at top form. He has no acrobatic dodge to get himself out of harm's way, setting him up as the expert's choice

game's openness to farming replayed levels and the Dark Realm arena can see them maxed-out well before the final act.

The problem with this happy excess is that after your characters have been forged – and in practice, all the action-RPG layers are garnish rather than necessity – there's little to left to accomplish within *Dawn*'s conservative confines. For a reinvention, it has an almost parodical lack of surprises: you've seen every abandoned village, sacked castle and anachronistic laboratory before, with the more striking imagery suggested by the game's plague of tainted cherry blossoms all but ignored until the final stage. Most boss fights fail to take into account the dual characters, or worse that the sheen has long dulled from victories determined by which combatant traps the other in a string of inescapable attacks. And though the storyline flirts with unpredictability at a false conclusion mid-game, it meanders on to the true conclusion – complete with boss gauntlet – untroubled by twists or drama.

Dawn takes so few risks that it's hard to imagine it appealing to new players beyond those who would have played *Onimusha* anyway, its belated advancements serving as much to show up the obstinately unchanged game at its core. There's still spectacle and solidity here: this is what Capcom does best. But if the developer had looked to Macbeth instead of Hamlet to borrow the villains' names, it might also have been reminded that with a clumsy telling, all that sound and fury can signify nothing. **[6]**





Camera control is invariably banned in areas lovely enough for sightseeing. If the alternative to the manual camera's dreary halls and desolate streets was for the game to be half as long but all as richly rendered as its standout moments, few would have complained

Lock kicking



In a small but notable addition, puzzle boxes can either be solved by the traditional method or smashed open – though taking the brute-force approach requires the contents to be appraised before they can be used. A similar application of choice to the other holdovers, or to characters' talents in accessing special areas (if strongman Roberto can force steel doors, surely he wouldn't break a sweat on wooden gates), would have done much to enliven *Dreams*' otherwise comatose linearity.



FIGHT NIGHT: ROUND 3

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS2, PSP, XBOX
PRICE: £50 (360), £40 (PS2, PSP, XBOX) RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (EA CHICAGO)





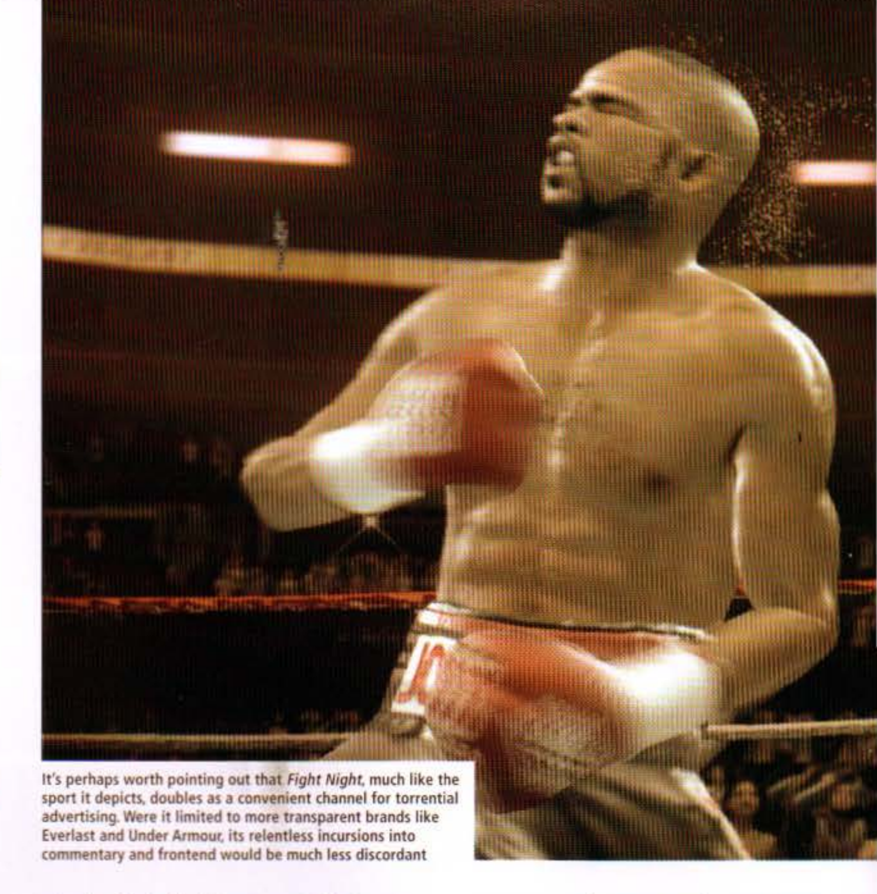
Weigh-ins are an unexpected latecomer to the updated career mode, adding a brief (albeit entirely incidental) moment of freshness to something generally stale. *Fight Night* could do with taking greater interest in the dramas that occur during boxing's apparent downtimes

When the two biggest players in the home hardware race wanted a poster-child for their technology – one with compelling qualities such as demonstrable code or, heaven forbid, a release date – both chose *Fight Night*. To them it was a photorealistic lure to dangle before conference crowds, a guaranteed sell with no explanation required. Perhaps it was naivety that led Sony to showcase at E3 a title that would strike first on Microsoft hardware, but then maybe it just looked so good that a potentially embarrassing tug-of-love became justifiable.

Fans of the series will appreciate that its importance runs deeper than either company's visual pitch. Its dual-analogue control system, Total Punch Control, has ensured that all challengers to its reign enter the ring with a glass jaw. That one-two combination of uniqueness and suitability exists within many a popular innovation throughout gaming, but the desolation of a genre and the stifling of its urge to compete through imitation is something only EA Chicago, with this series, can claim to have achieved. *Round 3* is the round in which that dominance will be asserted, confidence exuded and the run of form exploited. But in boxing, such assuredness often invites a mistake. *Fight Night* has no one left to fear but itself.

> The heaving breaths, drooping postures and gamut of facial expressions make a mockery of health and stamina bars





It's perhaps worth pointing out that *Fight Night*, much like the sport it depicts, doubles as a convenient channel for torrential advertising. Were it limited to more transparent brands like Everlast and Under Armour, its relentless incursions into commentary and frontend would be much less discordant

The anatomy of the game's visual leap is easily dissected and far from a black art. Textures and tweaks comprise much of it, the former a testament to EA's success in strong-arming its creative talents to the heart of their subject matter (the notoriously mercenary world of modern boxing, for example, that's been photographed here down to hair and follicle, warts and all), and the latter demonstrating Chicago's wisdom when exploiting such resources. Justifying HUD-less play is no mean feat, and though some animations (beyond the blocks and leans that are vital for responsive control) are quite robotic, the heaving breaths, drooping postures and gamut of facial expressions make a mockery of the idea of health and stamina bars.

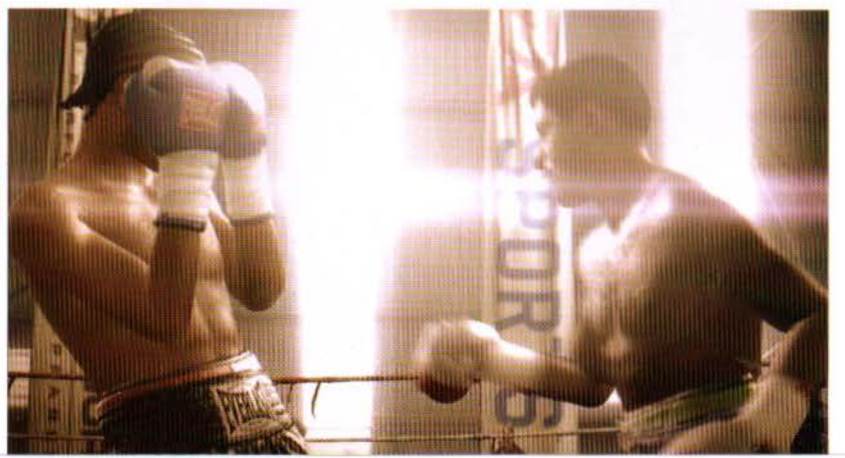
The expressive styles of legends such as Muhammed 'The Greatest' Ali and now 'Marvelous' Marvin Hagler have, through gradual osmosis, turned *Fight Night* into an ever greater showman – a braggart even. The closer its technology comes to capturing those personalities, the more its design serves to reflect them. The primary boast in *Round 3* is a crackling slo-mo knockdown replay, akin in sight and sound to someone striking a human piñata packed with blood and Twiglets, directly inspired by pugilistic money-shots in Raging Bull and The Matrix Revolutions. By any technical standard it's an outstanding animation system but it's also inflexible – the ripple of the cheek and the projected noodles of blood feature almost religiously. Had the developer restrained itself enough to make this a rarity – recognition, perhaps, of an exceptionally timed and positioned blow – it might never have grown old. But Chicago hasn't, so it does.

A step towards realism can also be problematic because it tends to leave a trailing foot in the world of old technology. In *Round 3*'s picture-perfect domain, the presence of spasmodic ragdoll effects and clipping glitches is doubly incongruous. Xbox 360 has offered no quick and easy exorcism of these demons, and EA has yet to find either the means or the time to banish them.

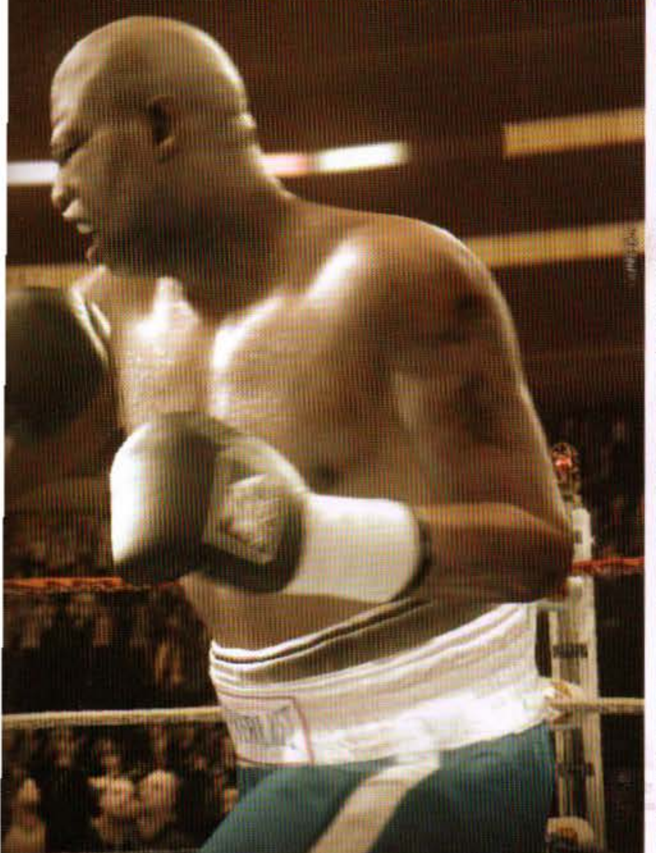
Elsewhere, its ambitions for a new generation of *Fight Night* are similarly schizophrenic. There are arguably two games here: that which new technology has enabled, and the older model, neglected in all the excitement. ESPN Classics, the former of these, is very much Chicago's pipedream of *Fight Night*, historically enthusiastic and painstakingly authentic. Mapping a great many styles, from Ali's rope-a-dope to Oscar De La Hoya's controlling jabs, on to Total Punch Control, it's a progressive and

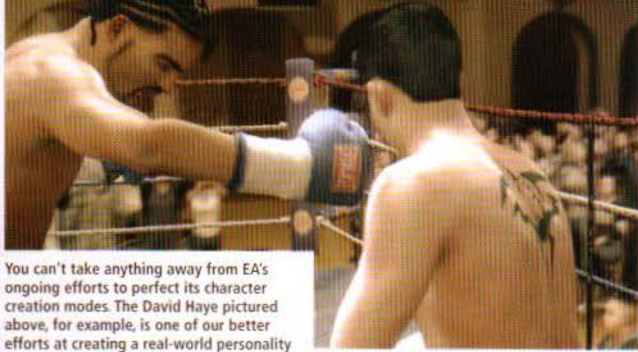


Conflicting fixations with authenticity and wild spectacle have given *Fight Night* an interesting aesthetic that complements its exhaustively realised fighters well. ESPN Classics bouts employ visual effects such as monochrome in their attempts to reflect the era in which the fight concerned took place









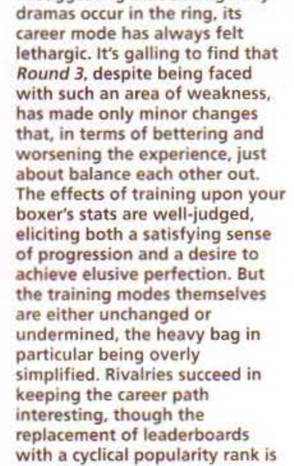
You can't take anything away from EA's ongoing efforts to perfect its character creation modes. The David Haye pictured above, for example, is one of our better efforts at creating a real-world personality



Round-a-bout



While *Fight Night* is quite correct in suggesting that boxing's key dramas occur in the ring, its career mode has always felt lethargic. It's galling to find that *Round 3*, despite being faced with such an area of weakness, has made only minor changes that, in terms of bettering and worsening the experience, just about balance each other out. The effects of training upon your boxer's stats are well-judged, eliciting both a satisfying sense of progression and a desire to achieve elusive perfection. But the training modes themselves are either unchanged or undermined, the heavy bag in particular being overly simplified. Rivalries succeed in keeping the career path interesting, though the replacement of leaderboards with a cyclical popularity rank is mystifying and inappropriate.





It's good to see a game taking character deformation effects beyond their customary purpose as novelties. Concentrating on a bloodied and bruised cheek or brow is a rewarding tactic, though it's a shame that the singleplayer AI fails to create those situations in which its use can be decisive

obsessive mix that in many ways shows the game at its best. Unlike the user-defined characters, the real-world models sport vastly improved deformation effects and, with Joe Tessitore's commentary feasting on their career backgrounds where none would otherwise exist, offer a generally superior experience. But with product placement decked across its every surface and seeping liberally into commentary, frontend and unlockables, you'll be tempted to think that the remaining singleplayer game has prioritised the securing of funds above advancing its design.

Plagued by imbalance, the *Round 3* career can serve up over 50 bouts before one goes the distance. The new stun punch – a thunderclap of a haymaker – helps ensure first to third round knockouts for the vast majority of fights. There's a difficulty spike in the closing stages, but it's an aggressive one – poor substitute for a graceful overall curve. It means that while Chicago's love of silver-screen boxing has created a thing of great beauty, it's also a little schizophrenic, torn between disparate visions of the same sport.

But even if they exist at odds, they can sometimes work together.

The game is a premier-league multiplayer experience, for example, with the competition of two human adversaries proving far better suited to its mechanics. Online play (finally available to Europe where in *Round 2* it wasn't) benefits from the cumulative insights of the EA Nation framework – its statistics tracking, rank calculation and judicial approach to dropped connections. Whether or not the severe connection difficulties we encountered during testing are spirited away when the game goes live on Live should be known by the time you get to read this review.

Fight Night is a difficult balancing act, and, what with the demands of multi-platform and multi-generation development, you'd have been optimistic to have expected an attainment of ultimate form rather than the sporadic show of brilliance offered by *Round 3*. But a more complete successor is almost sure to come, and what matters here is that the series remains the genre's main event above an eerily barren under card. **[8]**



Though the retention of the HUD as a menu option (not a *Fight Night* first) might be appreciated by some, *Round 3* has succeeded in its goal of making it an undesirable mode of play. Between its fighter animations and other visual cues, the game does a great job of keeping you abreast of both health and stamina levels, together with key punches





DRIVER: PARALLEL LINES

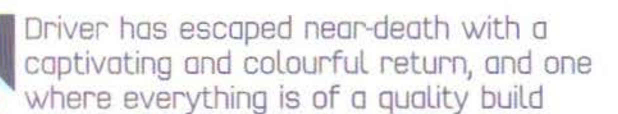
FORMAT: PS2 (VERSION TESTED), XBOX PRICE: £40
RELEASE: MARCH 17 PUBLISHER: ATARI DEVELOPER: REFLECTIONS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E157, E158



Unless it's an especially bad example, an in-game map can easily be taken for granted. It's difficult to feel that way in *Parallel Lines*, though, thanks to this sterling effort. Simple, functional and evocative, it makes the location and navigation of objectives a breeze

Reflections might play down the territorial overlap between its series and the eminently comparable *GTA*, but few would have predicted that as the PS2 era neared its end, the former would run riot over the roads they arguably share. The fourth *Driver* is a relentlessly thoughtful U-turn for a series smashed almost irrevocably out of shape.

By trashing the movie director functionality of the last game – indeed, any attempt to record the actions of its audience – *Driver* has freed itself from the memory constraints that choked it before. The tyranny of that iron fist, striking as it did upon every error because the game couldn't see beyond its nose, has ended. Leisure is the byword and punishment the swearword of a series that's taking apology to a hitherto unseen level – apologising for the disasters of its third instalment, the misadventure of its second and, just for the hell of it, the shortcomings of its overall genre. The latest incarnation pulls you straight to your feet when you fail and engages you with fanatical yet measured generosity. As an example, a botched mission can be restarted instantly with a button-press, and checkpoints are as sensibly spaced as they could be.



Driver has escaped near-death with a captivating and colourful return, and one where everything is of a quality build



In 1978, few of the game's double-dealing characters seemed likely to have trouble sleeping at night – even if The Kid opted largely to roam the streets instead. Cut to 2006, and the same cast has become established, fearful and protective

The foremost of its wisdoms is the understanding that if players are to spend their time almost exclusively behind the wheel, they'll want to keep moving. With this in mind, it streams its world and its action with equal efficiency, ticking over without pause from beginning to end. Its streaming technology is, without exaggeration, astonishing, constantly churning data, yet largely imperceptible. There's an opening load screen as the game gets its act together and, once in a blue moon, it reappears if you choose to warp from one side of the city to another or restart a particularly eventful mission. But even these are fleeting moments. For a game of this magnitude to run so gracefully, it deserves at least a tip of the hat.

With the ferocity of *Need For Speed: Most Wanted* and its ilk fresh in our minds, an early concern is that despite being patched up to roadworthiness, *Driver* may lack the urgency and spark to keep it competitive. But Reflections' faith in its uniqueness (contrary to all cursory impressions and subject to overwhelming criticism) is borne out as *Parallel Lines* unfolds. Its impetuous AI police take the game in unforeseen directions, each complementing its theme. Despite its own propensity for cataclysmic error, *Driver* has always encouraged professional rather than psychotic behaviour, rewarding anonymity over notoriety. *Parallel Lines*' use of two wanted gauges – one for you, the other for your vehicle – serves that philosophy well.

Ownership, personalisation, cunning and good old-fashioned thrill-seeking are its associated pleasures. The many cars, bikes and trucks are weighty at the wheel and distinctive to the eye, catching it more and more as collisions shred their layers across the road. Upgrades are novel and relevant, including performance parts, bullet-proof tyres and, of course, nitrous. All of which feeds neatly into your primary occupation: doing your job well while safeguarding your profile. The pay-offs for this are palpable: watching from the roadside as the police frantically search for your ditched vehicle or





The suggestion of skirting around and through the Big Apple is strongly enforced by some particularly wise scaling and draw-distance optimisation. Facing the right direction will pepper the horizon with distant landmarks and general urban sprawl. This becomes most appreciable when traversing the Brooklyn Bridge's huge span







Behaviourally, the New Yorkers of *Parallel Lines* are as you'd expect: legged bowling pins. Unlock the 'Body Snatcher' cheat, however, and you'll see them in a whole new light





One thing that *24: The Game* made apparent is that if you suggest an alleyway in a game featuring police chases, there damn well ought to be one. *Parallel Lines* is littered with them, and each is littered with boxes, skips, fences and debris – all destructible, of course

slipping past them amid traffic in a clean car but with a known face – something made easier by the purchase of tinted windows. *Parallel Lines* works these systems together through a traditional spread of mandatory and optional missions (some fresh, some familiar), but it does so on its own terms.

Staying true to itself is a lesson that *Driver* has done well. Knowing how to provide a considerate yet challenging playground is another. Despite being strewn with debris of every shape and size, *Parallel Lines*' New York presents few obstacles that will truly undermine the player. Lampposts, fences and most trees surrender to low-speed collisions, yet retain enough weight to discourage reckless driving. Pedestrians will similarly ping in all directions from your bonnet when you mount the pavement, but increasingly hinder your progress as you plough through them. All this is evidence of a brave design direction: to never throw the player back, but rather to impede their progress when they fail. Besides a considerate demeanour, the only thing that instils the confidence to tear along in such a manner is raw content, something the game again delivers.

Technically, it's unexpectedly solid but with seemingly inevitable imperfections. The beast of a physics engine is still prone to transient poltergeist activity, while rare clipping glitches, though never ruinous, can have comedic and sometimes irritating effects. The steady framerate exceeds expectations, particularly as this is a game where complex scenery, shadows, blooms and blurs regularly fill the frame, dipping only during momentary visual overloads or blockbuster pile-ups.

A notable flaw is the lack of an instant abort to accompany those on-demand restarts. While never overly long, the game's missions require a considerable time investment – a bitter pill if you happen into the wrong mission marker by mistake. Also, while we've established that the police play a passive role – traffic density and the clock being your true nemeses – they sometimes give up the chase, not just prematurely, but as soon as it starts. Ultimately, if there's a further issue with the game's familiarity – it does, after all, follow many conventions – it's one that's offset by the care and character with which each has been imbued.

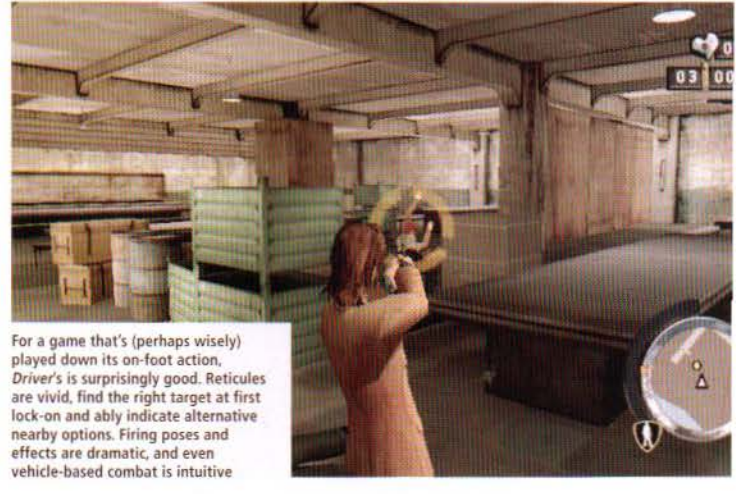
Give a genre enough time, experience and mistakes, and a game like this is sure to appear: nothing revolutionary, but keen to tweak the tiring formulae and exploit the lessons of history. *Driver* has escaped near-death with a captivating and colourful return, and one where everything from systems to cinematics is of a quality build. As surprises go, it's a juggernaut. **[7]**



Half-time break



Comprehensive in its effect and pulled off with the utmost finesse, *Parallel Lines*' mid-way era shift reflects a commitment to providing something that can quash any suggestions of anachronism. It's a mere trick, admittedly, but its impact is enormous – one of gaming's great sucker-punches. Your first steps into the New York of 2006 offer a stark contrast to the game's opening half. The vehicles are suddenly sophisticated, the music contemporary and the streets clean. The HUD is recoloured to a more clinical hue, and the established cast of characters are all shown to have found differing fortunes over the intervening years. There's barely a texture that isn't transformed. As for the narrative catalyst, we'll keep that secret as it's an obvious twist – but one with exciting repercussions.



For a game that's (perhaps wisely) played down its on-foot action, *Driver*'s is surprisingly good. Reticules are vivid, find the right target at first lock-on and ably indicate alternative nearby options. Firing poses and effects are dramatic, and even vehicle-based combat is intuitive



TOURIST TROPHY

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: ¥6,090 (£30)
RELEASE: NOW (JAPAN), APRIL 4 (US), TBC (UK) PUBLISHER: SCEI
DEVELOPER: POLYPHONY DIGITAL PREVIOUSLY IN: E157

Motorcycle diaries



Just like Kazunori Yamauchi's encyclopaedic *GT* car lists, Takamasa Shichisawa's selection of 125 motorcycles and mopeds betrays its maker's very personal obsession, and perhaps his age. Alongside the superbikes you'd expect, there's a very noticeable focus on relatively modest Japanese models of the 1980s. There's the same humane and gently humorous inclusion of mundane commercial models as well, in this case represented by mopeds. Japanese manufacturers dominate – in this field, they just do – but exotic offerings from Ducati, Aprilia, Triumph and BMW should appease the Europhiles. It goes without saying that the weight, power and personality of each machine is beautifully conveyed, if not quite their exhaust notes.

When is a racing game not a racing game? Polyphony's *Gran Turismo* series has always tested the boundaries of the genre, its obsession with pictorial and mechanical detail outstripping its interest in track competition. But *GT*'s new two-wheel stablemate takes its tendencies to an even greater extreme.

Tourist Trophy will be extremely familiar to *GT4* players, but not in everything. The crisp frontend is identical, as are the selection of tracks (barring the introduction of Valencia, and a handful of corner modifications) and the basics of the control scheme. Licence tests must be passed to gain access to new bikes and events, and Photo mode returns. This makes it all the better to enjoy the superlative work of Polyphony's 3D draughtsmen, which is still astonishing despite the ageing hardware.

But although there is a thorough range of tuning options, progress is no longer a matter of mods and money. You can't buy upgrades, or even bikes; faster rides must be won in Challenge mode by chasing a similar machine down and staying ahead of it for ten seconds. This, far more than the licence tests, can be punishing for novices in bike handling, but it gives *Tourist Trophy* an impressively pure focus on riding skill.



Gran Turismo has always been Sony's primary weapon in the graphical arms race, and _Tourist Trophy_ fights an impressive rearguard for its host platform. The solid environments, smooth framerate and detailed models are all exemplary, but come at a cost



Tourist Trophy's cockpit view is excellent, with the (functioning) instruments' shudder and roll dramatically increasing the sensation of speed. It's almost essential to getting a feeling for what's going on underneath you





Although contact between bikes is even more wooden than between cars in _GT_, it's still easy to fall off if you lose momentum or take a bump. Restarts are prompt enough not to frustrate, but it's still a welcome dose of danger

It wouldn't be fair to bemoan the lack of new tracks, either, because even the ones we've been circling for the best part of a decade are effectively rewritten by the motorcycle. Braking and turning-in points have changed, corner sequences flow with a different rhythm, and previously tame bumps and adverse cambers are suddenly treacherous. In fact, the Nordschleife Nurburgring was never so terrifying. Control sensitivity is excellent, but the handling is rather sterile if you don't opt for the professional control scheme (no traction control and independent front and rear braking). Manipulation of the rider is limited to an aerodynamic tuck (automatic outside of pro mode) and a bewildering screen of racing stance settings. Many will miss the dynamic weight-shifting on the right stick, which makes Climax's *Moto GP* games so tactile. But even without it, *Tourist Trophy*'s handling model is sophisticated and rewarding, as you'd expect from Polyphony.

That's just as well, because that's all there is. If you want to enjoy the 80-strong collection of road bikes, you can only do it in free run and the first four, one-on-one racing series. Roughly 80 per cent of the game's World mode admits racing models only, and there are half as many of those. These classes offer three evenly spaced riders to overtake, who often start well ahead of you, and are little more than pace-setters. You'll never start from a grid. It's an absorbing, but absolutely arid pursuit, not to mention an open admission that Polyphony has no interest in crafting racing AI; it values polygons more than opposition and is a collector first, racer second.

Tourist Trophy is never anything more than you, a motorcycle, and the quest for the racing line. It's more than accomplished enough to fulfil fanatics of bikes and simulations, but too dry for anyone else. **[6]**





As well as prize bikes, your efforts are rewarded with new, authentically branded safety gear for your rider (whose height you can input at the start). You can store four costume presets – two racing and two casual



Although *Enchant Arm*'s vision of a futuristic London is as visually drab as it is quaint, the cathedral (and the secrets beneath it) offers some of the game's best locations, and is also home to one of the few lengthy FMV sequences



EM ENCHANT ARM

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: ¥7,665 (£37) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JPN), TBA (UK, US)
PUBLISHER: FROM SOFTWARE DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E152, E161

Earning a new skill, weapon or Golem is hardly ever achieved by something as complex as item-combining or completing a lengthy collection quest – they're just unlocked by the player earning enough money, experience and battle spoils

Enchant Arm's darkest hour is a place within its world: the city of London. It's a mudslide of indistinct browns and lacklustre textures, a depressingly bland destination that emerges after a few hours of play. This may be an RPG that opens with some grand and scenic settings, but its looks definitely waver, its duller areas let down by flat colours and a miserly lack of detail.

The reason why this wobbly quality of environment is a genuine issue is because *Enchant Arm* is a roleplayer built from a generic adventure template, of linear plot movements and one-note exploration, meaning its settings are crucial for drawing the player in. It rarely deviates from the towns, dungeons 'n' random battles format, but it does have some artistry, in terms of its costumes and its more imaginative and intricately designed architecture. It's thick with lighting effects too, sometimes to great and gratifying effect, but they often bleed in a completely overblown and glaring manner, turning scenes of coolly shimmering bloom into ugly flares.

There's no great knack or subtlety to the turn-based combat, but fights take place on a pair of grids, allowing for some strategising in terms of areas of effect and team formation. There's a pleasant gradient to the combat, too, with a handful of methodical boss battles that prove tense rather than frustrating. The game has a wonderfully user-friendly approach to random battling: HP is replenished, status effects are removed and incapacitated characters are revived after each fight, and the game can be saved at virtually any peaceful moment. It's not as liberating as it sounds, though, since characters also have vitality points that are worn down by battle, forcing the player to find the recharge points strewn throughout the land. Which isn't difficult, since the progression of the game itself is so straightforward – and feels it. Its few puzzles and gopher quests feel emptily simple, too.

Enchant Arm won't captivate or excite, but it can still command attention. So, while there's worth and solidity here, it exists in the shadow of a game like *Dragon Quest VIII*, which has flawless craftsmanship to match its strong and immaculate art style, and offers more to do despite being thought of as so derivative in structure. It's a unique offering for 360 owners – as it would have been for Xbox – certainly, but one whose highlights can't match those of the RPGs currently burning brightly on PS2. **[6]**



While character movement is stable and full camera control is offered throughout most of the game, *Enchant Arm*'s hero, Atsuma, visibly hovers above the ground when climbing stairs or crossing any uneven surface





Aside from the Golems, the one diversion to stray you from the beaten path is London's casino, offering bingo, roulette, slot machines and a highly profitable battle tournament. There's a better reason to spend time there, however: a range of exclusive weapons, items and Golems can only be bought with casino-won chips

Golems



The biggest distraction offered up by *Enchant Arm* is its collection of Golems – creatures that can be earned or bought and added to the player's team. These take in virtually every enemy, including the occasional boss character, and with a number of more novel hidden Golems to be uncovered. With four slots in your team, and four main characters that need to be levelled, it's hard to nurture more than a handful of Golems while keeping them relevant to the progressively difficult battles. The game is continually providing a wealthy stream of new Golems, though, a range that offers a genuine sense of variety, as much in appearance as the skillsets offered.



THE OUTFIT

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: MARCH 17
PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: RELIC
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E157, E158

Level pegging



Each stage requires the taking of several strategic objectives, including an armoury, motor pool and radio tower. These enable – respectively – increasingly powerful units, tanks and air strikes. The latter two offer the greatest attack power and are usually located towards the end of each stage. It sounds restrictive – and feels it to begin with – but, given the superiority of tanks and the solitary nature of leading a vehicle assault, it's perhaps the right choice to have made. Captured bases also act as respawn points, reinserting the player into the level in the state they left it, meaning that victory is almost certain. How gradual this is is down to the player's ability; it's quicksave gaming without the need to quicksave.

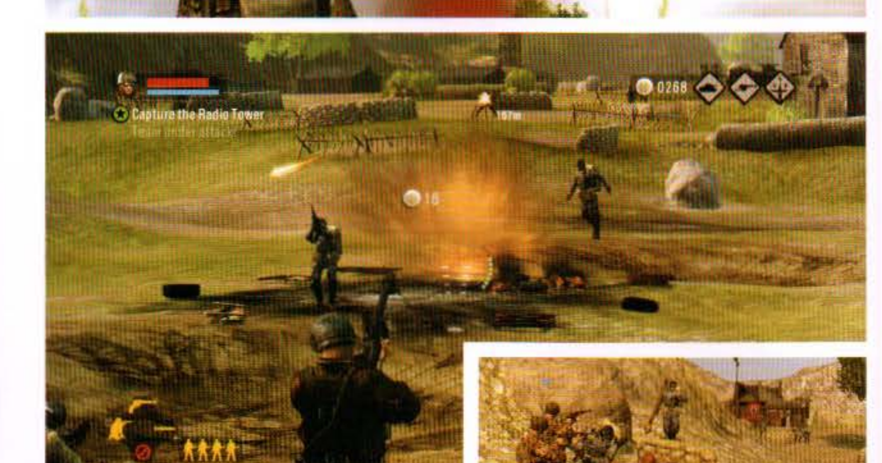
At the heart of *The Outfit* is 'Destruction on Demand', a feature that turns war into a fast-food takeaway service. This means that you can order allied units to be dropped into the battlefield wherever and whenever they like, provided you've earned enough Field Units by slaying enemy troops. 'Dropped' is too neat a word for it, though: munitions plonk to the ground with an unceremonious splat, released from airplanes and borne to Earth on parachutes. The idea behind the DoD system is to mingle realtime strategising with thirdperson running and gunning. 'Destruction on Demand' is a slight misnomer, though, as the player starts out each stage with few units available for purchase. More military muscle becomes available as each area is conquered (see 'Level pegging'), meaning your war machines can only be properly supersized after having made some substantial progress.

Despite the demolition involved in this game, it plays out in an ordered manner, with large chunks of most stages winding a corridor from start to finish, while taking in increasingly aggressive enemy outposts as they go. But this premise is itself something of a letdown, as *The Outfit* is at its best at its most chaotic. Later levels facilitate this well, assaulting the player with reams of foot soldiers and squads of armour, making each push an intense one. The DoD interface stands up well, too, using a ring selection menu that doesn't feel clumsy.

And yet, perhaps surprisingly for such an offensively named idea, the system is strongest when you're made to go on the defensive, with the game giving you just a few moments to organise autonomous reinforcements in the form of anti-tank cannons and gun emplacements, before being set upon by waves of Nazi troops. Enemy vehicles, in particular, seem keen to up the entertainment, committing suicidal hit'n'run attacks on your ranks.

It's at its weakest, though, when you are on the offensive, a bid that often demands a vehicle and an approach that feels lonely compared to the rest of the game. Despite having four troops on board, the player is both driver and gunner, and vehicles can't be commanded to operate independently. This is where multiplayer compensates, offering a wealth of maps that allow team skirmishes, or just classic online coop that enlivens the battlefield in a way that singleplayer just can't match.

It's a decent meeting of destruction and instruction, and one that gives a good taste of its potential in singleplayer. However, it doesn't feel like a full exploitation of its ideas and its ultra-destructible and moderately pretty world. Like *Full Auto*, it's a game built with focus and one that's going in a truly worthwhile direction, but that falls short of greatness. **[7]**

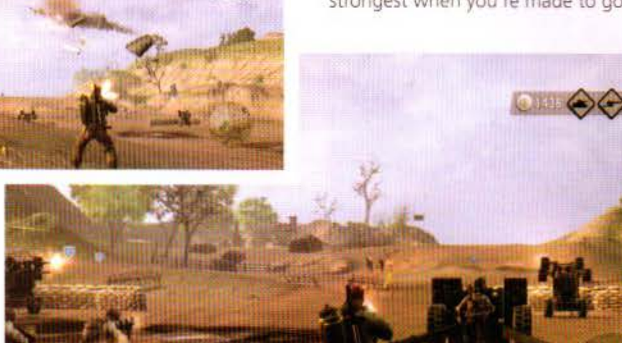


As well as the basic squad commands, each of the three characters has a unique order to issue to their men: vehicle assault, melee raid, tear gas. Each has two weapons, one ranged and one close combat, along with a unique grenade



Vehicle handling, based on a twin-stick system of movement and aiming, feels woolly and unwieldy. It gets better with practice – and tanks do fit the control scheme the snuggest – but jeeps and halftracks never quite provide a smooth ride

Each mission includes objectives that appear on the fly and give way to some of the more demanding and time-dependent goals. They almost always centre on destroying things, or protecting things by destroying yet more things





***The Outfit*'s served well by its comic-book exaggerations, which makes the shakiness of some of the cutscenes feel more palatable. The roughneck, one-liner soundbites do tend to loop and irritate far too quickly, though**





Dungeons are often beautiful, but they're nothing but blank backdrops. The more turns you take, the more chests you'll find, but there's little sense of exploration and none of the puzzle elements that made *Tales Of Symphonia* so satisfying

TALES OF LEGENDIA

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $50 (£29) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: NAMCO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (TALES STUDIO)

New Game -



One of *Legendia*'s most frustrating decisions is to lock away two of its most interesting elements until after the game has been completed. Each main character is given their own quest chapter – extra content which further extends the game's lifespan and fleshes out their stories. These extended missions also allow you to assemble more materials for the newly opened Composition shop, which can synthesise powerful new items. It's commendable to see such effort going in to reward the minority who complete the game more than once, but frustrating to see such bonuses locked away from less dedicated players.

Often the first part of a review that people read is a score, but in *Tales Of Legendia*'s case it feels like, instead of a mark out of ten, that score should be presented as a football result. The *Tales* series may have cornered the market in the action-RPG genre, but coming so soon after *Dragon Quest VIII* rewrote the traditional rulebook, comparisons are inevitable – and not particularly flattering.

Tales games have always thrived on bustling character lists and elastically epic plots. *Legendia*'s tale, of a mysterious island-sized ship which can only be fully awaken by the power of a descendent of an ancient race, sets off from a laudably arcane premise, but soon gets bogged down in a crushingly predictable round of botched rescues, hammy betrayals and implausible quest requirements. And while that character roster can't be faulted for a lack of variety, the elaborate routines of crushes, guilty secrets and grudging rivalries never come alive, not least in this stodgy translation. With the wit and eloquence of *DQVIII* so fresh in the mind, it feels like one-nil almost from the off.

Where *Tales* should score is in its active battle system, which gives you direct control over one character – either a melee attacker or a magic user – and indirect control over the rest of your party. It's certainly dynamic – fights bristle with chaos and colour – but there's a lack of precision in the physical combat and a lack of depth in the element-based strategic play which makes battles unrewarding. Random encounters are poorly metered and offer little in the way of interesting reward. The combat systems may be radically different, but *Legendia* could learn a great deal from the inventiveness and pacing of *DQVIII*'s battles. Two-nil.

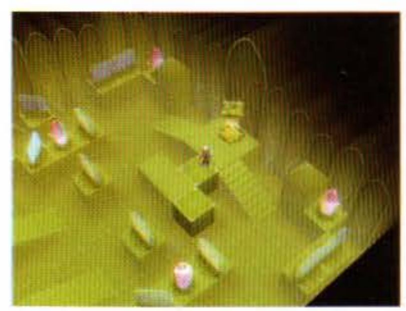
A quick glance at the bland, blocky map and the rather unengaging character models make it inevitable that *DQVIII*'s lustrous visuals bag it another easy point. However, *Tales*' traditionally creative dungeon design comes to the rescue, giving each chapter a genuine sense of adventure as you anticipate what organic shimmers or high-tech gloss might be in store. There may be little to catch your attention when you get there – dungeons are little more than twisting threads strung with random battles – but their splendour alone lets *Legendia* claw back a point and end the match at three-one.

It's not a fair fight, of course, or even a fair playing field, since each game is trying to do something different and distinct. Nonetheless, for the eighth game in the series Square-Enix brought refinement, excellence and clarity to its blueprint. Namco isn't able to say the same for *Tales*. **[5]**





The locations which stud the world map are pretty enough, but the world itself is bland, clumsily implemented and acts as nothing more than a reservoir of random battles. Happily a warp system allows you to move freely between places you've already visited



Most dungeons contain a single 'puzzle booth', an extremely old-fashioned challenge of block-pushing and beam-reflecting, which isn't even well presented





DIRGE OF CERBERUS: FINAL FANTASY VII

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: ¥8,190 (£40) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: SQUARE-ENIX DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Despite inhabiting one of videogaming's most treasured universes, *Dirge Of Cerberus* is a game that nobody asked for. It's not that a sequel to *Final Fantasy VII*, the Japanese RPG that really brought the genre to the western masses, wasn't wanted. But no one imagined such a game would centre not only on just one of that game's fringe characters, but also on a completely different genre.

Initially, all shocked silence and shuffle-footed concern following the decision to leap into *Devil May Cry*-styled action adventuring looks unwarranted. *Dirge Of Cerberus* prettily transplants each CGI wall of Midgar from the PS1 original into dramatically lit polygon appeal. Likewise, lithe, gun-toting protagonist Vincent Valentine, promoted from optional sub-character to main attraction, appears an excellent emo poster-boy alternative to Cloud Strife's iconic charm.

But as soon as the game is wrested from Square-Enix's meticulously directed and ubiquitous cutscenes into actual playing hands, its problems tumble over themselves for attention. The fight system, a mixture of third- and firstperson-perspective shooting, aims for *Resident Evil 4*'s slick magnificence. But it's a superficial imitation that clearly and embarrassingly fails to understand anything beyond its visual language. Likewise the flow of play is unsophisticated, requiring repeated stops to successfully line up even the most basic shots on the identikit and AI-dull enemies. This results in ugly, rigid, staccato play that feels exceptionally dated.

Vincent is given a faltering jump move which is not only mostly redundant due to the unassailable knee-high street furniture but which also undermines the comic book promise of his cutscene skyscraper-scaling acrobatics. Similarly, whereas *Devil May Cry* perfectly marries gunplay and melee attacks, *Dirge Of Cerberus*'s physical combat option is almost totally superfluous, serving mostly to save ammo by smashing crates instead of shooting them. Even the obligatory combo counter has no meaningful use here and, damningly for a game that focuses on gunplay, the weapons lack urgency in both sound and recoil, and all are overly twitchy and clumsy to wield.

Despite these many flaws there is some redemption to be had: the RPG elements and deeply customisable gun options show the developer confident on home turf, and the game's fast pacing, scattershot setpieces and exorbitant production values make it a pleasant, if frequently bland place to be. But ultimately this is development by numbers, an expertly coloured-in outline, borrowed and clumsily modified by a developer hopelessly out of its field of expertise. Take away the setting and the branding, wipe away the financial polish, and you'll find this is a disappointment of a videogame. And worse, it's a high-profile demonstration of the fact that those who created this much-loved universe have lost their understanding of what originally made it so engaging. **[4]**



Bosses are uninventive, straightforward affairs that display none of *Final Fantasy VII*'s inspirational characterisation in either their physical design or ensuing attack patterns





Predictably, many of *FFVII*'s characters make cameos, and gameplay is diversified by allowing some control of them in setpieces

Clicking the trigger buttons executes Vincent's limit-break move, in which he transforms into a more powerful version of himself. Your guns are removed, however, leaving just strong melee attacks and a vaguely directional fireball move



Cash in the attic



***Dirge Of Cerberus*, the third release in the cross-platform, multimedia family of *Final Fantasy VII* titles, is the only console title. The story follows on directly from the recent spin-off UMD/DVD CGI film release, Advent Children, so narrative fans already upset by the direction taken with the game's mythology since the departure of *Final Fantasy* originator, Hironobu Sakaguchi, will find little comfort here. Director Takayoshi Nakazato claimed to be aiming for *Half-Life: The RPG* with this game, a curious failed goal for a world so far removed from that inspiration. Since Square-Enix has claimed that this game signals closure to the *FFVII* story, it is unlikely Nakazato will get another shot.**

Bradleys are a rare treat, and you'll share the relief of your onscreen team when one hoves into view with its 25mm cannon standing proud. It's all but invincible in early levels – but susceptible to rocket attack later on







Smoke cover is crucial – especially in later levels, where rounding a corner without a real pea-souper protecting your team will leave them vulnerable to snipers and rocket fire. Grenades, unlike bullets, cannot be replenished at Casevacs



The wounded can be carried with the rest of the team, at the expense of speed. It's entirely possible to heartlessly leave wounded teammates behind – but ignoring their swearing and screaming isn't easy, especially in the echoing market hall of the second level

FULL SPECTRUM WARRIOR: TEN HAMMERS

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £35 RELEASE: MARCH 31
PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: PANDEMIC STUDIOS PREVIOUSLY IN: E156, E158

War of words



Ten Hammers' attempts to deliver an emotional kick are embarrassingly clumsy. The amusingly named Sgt Daniel Daniels appears in cutscenes to wail at the death of colleagues and help liberate the locals by teaching them how to play baseball – while your squad as a whole is happy to react to the death of insurgents with high fives and "What a rush!" The game's awful storytelling reaches its nadir when the British turn up, inevitably yelling "bloody Christ!" and using the mystery term "sausage drivers".

At last – a game that manages to evoke the mental anguish of combat. The tendency of *Ten Hammers'* medic to mutter "It's the spinal injuries I hate" every few seconds for the duration of an entire mission – even as he's being drowned out by gunfire – is, in all likelihood, a bug. It'll send you over the edge regardless.

The mad medic's jarring asides are just one way in which *Ten Hammers'* rough edges routinely pop the bubble of convincing authenticity. But *Full Spectrum Warrior* still has its gratifyingly cerebral RTS-esque mechanics on its side, and the process of hurtling between cover points and laying down sector fire is as uniquely gripping as it was in the original.



With as many as four distinct units available, each further subdivideable into two teams using the Black and White buttons, the list of tactical options open to you has grown from that of the original game. Teams can now give orders to each other, making group movement easier

Pandemic has seemingly capitulated to those who didn't 'get' *FSW* the first time around, and now your skills have expanded to controlling tanks, storming buildings and executing down-the-barrel targeted kills. This, combined with a fuller spectrum of abilities – scouting and splitting your team – allows *Ten Hammers* to counter criticism of its monotone predecessor with a barrage of armoured trucks, SMGs and sniper ambushes. Nonetheless, taut, cautious play is still forced out of you, and missions are hypnotically tense even when – *especially* when – there's no enemy in sight.

But the streets of Zekistan are unforgiving, and it's essential as well as satisfying to learn how your enemy – Pandemic – thinks, up until you find you're routinely picking the correct side of a parked car or fruit stall to shield yourself from a hail of fresh gunfire.

But war isn't always fair. You *will* die when you turn a corner into an SMG ambush, and restarting with psychic foreknowledge of the enemy's plans ruins the sense of surviving on your wits (and weapons) alone. Trigger points and doors that churn out insurgents to order only shatter the illusion further.

Ten Hammers' other failings are obvious early on. Calling in airstrikes is mapped to the same control as your team leader's handy sniping ability – too often you'll accidentally unleash apocalyptic sky terror on a single man hiding behind a barrel. Enemies can be easily tricked into running for cover toward a grenade. And the camera's tendency to face wherever it likes after switching between Alpha and Bravo teams can be paralysingly disorienting.

It's on Live, though, that *Ten Hammers* truly explodes into life, the absolute requirement for tactics creating jumpy matches that outgun anything so far on Xbox or its baby brother. This, and the game's ability to stay with you long after you leave Zekistan behind, means its failings are ultimately forgiveable. It's just the spinal injuries you'll hate. **[7]**





SONIC RIDERS

FORMAT: GC (VERSION TESTED), PS2, XBOX PRICE: £40
RELEASE: MARCH 17 PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: SONIC TEAM



Stages are threaded with *Sonic Heroes*-style shortcuts, based on a character's skill type: Power, Speed or Flying. While each shortcut gate is clearly marked, they're rarely user-friendly

If the old Sonic vs Mario rivalry reared its head again, you'd be hard pressed not to see it as a case of Hare vs Tortoise. Put *Sonic Riders* and *Mario Kart DS* side by side and you'd have a race that's won by the steadier, more considerate game, with the former showing itself to be initially speedy, but prematurely running out of steam.

To its credit, *Sonic Riders* does try to offer some neat ideas, even if its whole feels garbled and imprecise in action. A lap-based racing game starring the usual suspects and some new faces, the riders compete atop hoverboards and gain boost through performing simple trick combos – so far, so generic – but the idea of drafting is enjoyably exaggerated. Opponents trail great wafts of slipstream in their wake, temporary tunnels of turbo that are satisfying to ride, more so than the actual courses; there's also an elegant take on speed launching at the start line.

With stages built from a typically garish range of bright colours, traversing the few courses on offer (buffered by a handful of arenas for the slipshod deathmatch mode) is initially frustrating, partially because there's seemingly so much track furniture to take in. But it's quickly clear that success in each race relies on the memorising and rote use of shortcuts and speed chevrons, with no middle ground for gradually carving and battling through the pack. It's just not accurate or tangible enough to be rewarding, handling with the same kind of wool as Sonic's 3D platformers.

Fast without feeling slick, detailed without feeling deep, *Sonic Riders* feels less than the sum of its parts, despite a handful of pleasing aspects. Forget Sonic vs Mario – this is beginning to seem more like Sonic vs Crash: moderately funky IP outings for those who follow the familiar face of a mascot, persistently selling well but not delivering elsewhere. **[4]**





Every stage features a prop that activates a micro cutscene, as the player's character is hurled halfway around the stage in a manner none too distant from *Sonic Adventure*'s on-rails air rides



SPLINTER CELL ESSENTIALS

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £40 RELEASE: MARCH 31
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: UBISOFT MONTREAL
PREVIOUSLY IN: E158

You'd be justified in approaching *Splinter Cell Essentials* as everything that could be expected of a PSP adaptation, were such expectations actually in place. Neither the year since launch nor portable versions of *GTA*, *Burnout*, *Winning Eleven* and *Prince Of Persia* have suggested an average bar of quality. For a time, the augmented medley of old and new missions assembled here toys with that uncertainty, its opening level hopping between glitching exteriors and more faithful alcoves and passageways. As was the case with the aforementioned *Prince* title, Montreal knows its game when it comes to turning dual-analogue control schemes into something fit for PSP, but for all its pretences of being more than mere adaptation, *Essentials* still tests the limits of portability's charm.

It's an occasionally glamorous reflection of a sorry state of affairs, the handheld being recognised for its market rather than design potential. The game slips on to the format amid a drip-feed of convenient projects, all representing greater value for publisher than consumer. Though it's obvious that the developer is aware that PS2-to-PSP is more than a one-click conversion, the litany of faults in its efforts thus far has you wondering. Camera clipping issues run rampant through many of this game's levels, arising in every dastardly form from popping inside Sam Fisher's texture-thin skull to passing through walls and floors. Image brightness is a predictable concern, but is at least alleviated (or bandaged) by the saving grace of night-vision goggles.

Despite a fair few moments of mobile awe, the governing and familiar impression here is of compromise. The vivid aesthetic and precise audio of the console versions have respectively been mellowed and overplayed, the design beaten into handheld shape and accordingly bruised. The collection of levels, segued together as an obvious but efficient flashback/forward story is a victim of this circumstance, less an assembly of series highlights than of what works best on the technology at hand. Ubisoft has invested considerable talent here, but the need to invest more attention is clear. **[6]**



Essentials retains a great many of *Splinter Cell*'s audio cues, but what PSP has apparently necessitated is a loss of subtlety. With two graphs – left and right – it attempts to visually represent the positional audio that stereo, when troubled by anticipated background noise, cannot provide



Essentials isn't short of defining *Splinter Cell* moments such as hushed interrogations and hasty darts into shadow, but the PSP instalment falls down in replicating that other series trait of technical sophistication



BLEACH DS: SOUTEN NI KAKERU UNMEI

FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥5,040 (£25) RELEASE: NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: TREASURE

Next out of Treasure's chest is a beat 'em up, of all things. Those who were there for the frontier days of grey importing will immediately think of the company's *Yu Yu Hakusho: Makyo Toitsusen* – an anime-based Mega Drive fighter. Hold that thought, because *Bleach DS* is the sequel in all but licence.

That game's two-platform system, making the Z-plane your plaything, is back. The emphasis on mid-air juggling and powerful multi-hit combos is there. Even the way the music claws your eardrums raw is reminiscent of brash '90s titles. It's no surprise *Bleach DS* feels so welcomely old-fashioned – a solid, responsive, lightning-fast 2D fighter which, like so many Treasure titles, hovers just the right side of battering your eyes and fingers into total submission.

With large, crisp sprites and over-the-top cutscenes for some of the more preposterous specials, *Bleach DS* is the prettiest fighter on DS by some margin. But it's also the most confidently accomplished, with its slick firework displays of fourplayer combat, and a 'Spirit' meter – filled with the power to perform specials and hop between planes – that ensures balanced, complex fights. *Dragonball Z* fans, landed with the limp *Supersonic Warriors*, are advised to switch pronto.

Real depth results from the 60 thumb-activated Spirit Cards, which swing matches back and forth via effects that range from replenishing HP to forcing an opponent to crouch. More impressively, the deckful of magic successfully knocks cold the idea that beat 'em ups should leave the touchscreen well alone. Bizarrely, then, it's the traditional controls that are the real issue. The DS's tiny face buttons and cramp-inducing triggers, combined with the rocking motion of the handheld as you hammer away, are not a good match for *Bleach*'s dizzying speed.

That wouldn't necessarily be a problem with just 23 solo missions and a limited Arcade mode. But sore fingers are guaranteed with *Bleach DS*'s unusual multiplayer double whammy: four players with just one cart, and fully online matches. Admittedly, any game where combos are so easy to execute and jumping is such a handy tactic is liable to irk your hardcore player, but when it comes to multiplayer options, *Bleach DS* kills 99 per cent of known DS beat 'em ups – even the excellent *Jump Superstars* – dead. **[7]**



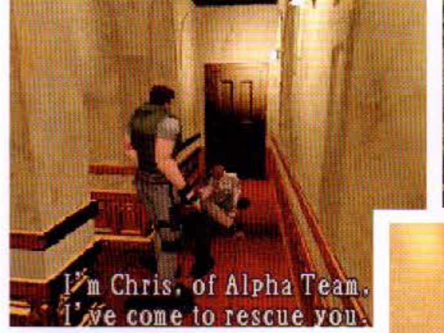
In common with fellow multifighter beat 'em ups such as GameCube's *Super Smash Bros Melee*, it's a struggle to work out quite what's going on when four players are flinging their fury about – but at least it's an enjoyable and exciting struggle





RESIDENT EVIL: DEADLY SILENCE

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: NOW (US), MARCH 31 (UK)
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E157



It's hard to know how to feel about rehashes like this; after all, gaming has as much right as any other medium to preserve and promote its past glories, and Capcom certainly has a right to celebrate the tenth anniversary of its genre-defining chiller. A cut-price, note-perfect download of a retro favourite is one thing, but a full-price port (with novelty embellishments) to a slightly unsuited system is quite another. Especially when the game in question has already been handsomely remounted recently by its makers.

Deadly Silence does not rewrite the STARS team's bloody escape from a zombie-infested mansion the way the GameCube's *Resident Evil* did. It's true that it does ease the original's much-cursed clumsiness with some welcome additional moves (including an instant about-turn and some handy knife attacks); and in Rebirth mode it adds a few extra enemies, as well as box-ticking DS interludes employing the touchscreen or microphone. There are also some clever, but technically hamstrung, multi-cart multiplayer modes. Otherwise, though, it's identical to the PlayStation version, right down to the videotaped intro movie and am-dram voice acting. Its elegant set design aside, *Resident Evil* hasn't aged at all gracefully, coming across as quaint, not a little camp, and not even remotely scary on the small screen.

Perhaps, though, it's not the intervening years that have weathered this warhorse, but one intervening sequel: *Resident Evil 4*. In the wake of that great entertainer, the original's fixed camera, mean-spirited attitude to inventory and save points, ceaseless item-ferrying, awkward difficulty curve and imprecise combat initially feel punishing and cheerless. But despite it all, after an hour or two you'll find yourself captivated, urged on by the expert pacing and hypnotic atmosphere of this tortuous man-trap of a game. There may be better ways to relive *Resident Evil* than *Deadly Silence*, but no version could demote it from its status as a creaky but compelling classic. **[6]**



One of the DS-specific additions to Rebirth mode are short firstperson ambushes that require stabs and slashes of your knife on the touchscreen. They blend in well and help maintain tension, but are too simple to really shake things up



Deadly Silence's greatest addition is also its simplest: the permanent map display on the top screen. Often bemoaned as the laziest DS customisation, when it comes to unravelling *Resident Evil*'s locks and corridors, it's a godsend





OUTRUN 2006: COAST 2 COAST

FORMAT: PC, PS2, PSP (VERSION TESTED), XBOX
PRICE: £40, £30 (PC) RELEASE: MARCH 31
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: SUMO DIGITAL







If it transpires that all that stands between *Coast 2 Coast* and handheld near-perfection is a mere 111MHz of fenced-off CPU clock speed and the inadequately explained red tape that prohibits its use, Sony's reasoning for limiting its portable hardware's potential in such a way again warrants scrutiny

OutRun's wealth is the currency that PSP craves: a radiant palette to splash across its screen, an eclectic gameworld segmented by original design into bite-size chunks, a purist interface of twin buttons and stick and an aural heritage that transcends any quirks of reproduction. The *Coast 2 Coast* package is an explosion of that fortune, but despite Sumo's proven adeptness with both Sony and Sega's property, the exchange rate of console and coin-op against PlayStation Portable is unpredictable at best. This month has already seen one hit-and-miss example.

Though there's a caveat we'll get to in a moment, *OutRun 2* on PSP is ultimately a win for publisher, developer and expectant series fans. For a start, although it benefits from simply being miniaturised, it's attractive in ways that its PS2 sibling isn't. It is, in fact, a gorgeous gift to its hardware's often neglected display and an idyllic blast of Sega-branded fresh air. In every sense but one, the conversion hits its mark; analogue nub control works well, the *OutRun* miles system is ideally suited to mobile play, the PS2 profile synchronisation feature will doubtlessly be of use to those it serves, no notable holes exist in the game's content, audio is finely preserved and abundantly provided, and wireless multiplayer support is as advertised.

But the framerate pays the toll. Given a sufficient volume of scenery or traffic, *Coast 2 Coast* grinds to a degree that even the Xbox version of its Chihiro predecessor never saw. Only a supreme apologist could suggest that such performance dips aren't as damaging as they are disappointing, but conversely a realist should soon become capable of accepting them, momentary as they are. There's something in the game's graceful flow of drifts and adjustments that spares it the criticism that some might say it deserves. Sumo has evidently found itself charged with the unenviable task of breaking *OutRun* to ensure a handheld fit, and the decision to target its legs rather than its face demonstrates greater wisdom than you might think. Though the concession is also greater than you may have feared, the result remains triumphant. **[8]**



AGE OF EMPIRES: THE AGE OF KINGS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $30 (£35) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), MAY 5 (UK)
PUBLISHER: MAJESCO DEVELOPER: BACKBONE VANCOUVER

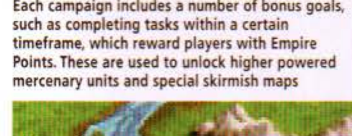
Of the genres most highly anticipated and as yet shamefully under-represented on the DS, directly underneath the LucasArts adventure lineup is realtime strategy. With their one-click interfaces and their respective age undercutting raw power requirements, both seem natural fits. Of course *The Age Of Kings*, directly inspired by the original of the same name, hasn't been brought over in realtime, but it does come as close as any other title for the handheld to recreating the PC-flavoured strategy longed for by fans.

Much to its credit, Backbone Vancouver has done a masterful job in taking the complexity of Ensemble's original and stripping it to its bare essentials for portable play. Focusing on the 'heroes' of five civilisations, with five or six diverse and distinct historic narrative driven campaigns for each, the game's turn-based reworking is as intuitive and compulsive as one would expect from a post-*Advance Wars* landscape. Resource management, a key component for any strategy campaign, is now as simple as leading a villager to untapped resource patches and constructing a mill or mine, which then freely provides a set amount of food and gold per turn. The research and technology trees, too, have been put in a layer outside the main player interaction, giving the option of one new purchasable technology every round, to aid in resource output or your units' attack and defence stats. The units themselves, while all more or less cultural reskinnings off a standard set, have been sharply balanced against one another, with hero units left to provide unique powers.

However, the game's reductionism does come at certain costs. With a tightly packed fixed isometric perspective, overpopulated skirmishes often result in a garbled mess of entirely indistinguishable overlapping sprites, especially when raiding or defending town centres. Thankfully, this is where the dual screens prove their purpose by clearly displaying the selected unit on the upper screen, but continually hunting for your foes remains unduly cumbersome. Though the game does fully support the touchscreen, it's especially in these situations that the novelty wears thin and a reliance on the equally encumbered D-pad takes hold.

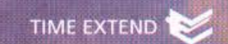
Though necessarily slighter in its scope than the original, the game's campaigns are no more slender, with battles that can frequently stretch on for hours at a time – especially when attempting to accomplish all bonus goals. While it lacks the polish and visual clarity of its firstparty-produced competitors, it remains a valuable addition to the handheld strategy family. **[7]**




Each campaign includes a number of bonus goals, such as completing tasks within a certain timeframe, which reward players with Empire Points. These are used to unlock higher powered mercenary units and special skirmish maps




SEGA SATURN



TIME EXTEND

RADIANT SILVERGUN

FORMAT: **SATURN**
PUBLISHER: **ESP**
DEVELOPER: **TREASURE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE DATE: **1998**

A revelation that should have started a revolution, Radiant Silvergun has become famous instead as a collector's investment piece. Is it gaming's greatest injustice?

If you want to play *Radiant Silvergun* – and in a few pages' time you may – you'll need two things: a Japanese Saturn and a spare £100. Everyone has tales to tell of the arms and legs they've paid for a longed-for game, whether it was stomaching £65 for *Mario 64* or handing over £90 to an unscrupulous indie for a 'rare' copy of *Super Street Fighter II*. But every gamer who knows their way around eBay sucks their teeth and shakes their heads at the merest mention of Treasure's landmark shooter. It's a title that brings out every gamer's inner plumber: ask after it and the most likely thing you'll hear is a despairing 'It'll cost you...'

One of the last ever Saturn games, and limited to a Japan-only release with a modest manufacturing run (only around 35,000 were made), it was inevitable that *Radiant Silvergun* would end up a collector's item. For fans of the game, this brings twin frustrations – first of the spiralling prices of second-hand copies, and second that those excessive prices have become the thing that the game is remembered for. Peerlessly intelligent, ambitiously inventive and gracefully realised, every square inch of the game is deserving of discussion, yet what gets talked about most is the only one that isn't: the price tag.

Focus instead on the moody richness of the cover art, the classy coherence of the option screens and the monolithic permanence of the hi-score screen. Even the most incidental of visual details adds to



BLACK AND WHITE

A debate still rages about whether or not Ikaruga counts as a 'true' *sequel* to *Radiant Silvergun*. It's not quite clear why there is any doubt: the 'RS2' on the latter game's start screen, combined with the colour-coded combo system and the design of much of the architecture, makes the relationship clear. Nonetheless, the games are clearly contrasted, with *Ikaruga* abandoning *Silvergun*'s exuberance and generosity, and forcing the player – with visually stunning effect – to focus in on the colour-dependent attack patterns and puzzle-based level design which had formed only part of the first game's riches.







Level design – visually and structurally – is peerlessly creative, and some of its embryonic demonstrations of bullet hell and grazing later became standard



the sense of significance – warning you that this isn't going to be an experience to take lightly. And as the game begins, and your attention shifts from every square inch to every split second, that warning is borne out. Your sleek, deadly ship twirls from the foreground to settle into place on the 2D plane, a glorious future Earth spinning behind in 3D space, as with a disorienting swoop you're thrown headlong into the sky. Hitoshi Sakimoto, fresh from scoring *Final Fantasy Tactics*, arrives to accompany your progress, marshalling his midi orchestra to instil in you the grandeur of the task you face. Tubular bells peal out a resounding alarm, snares drill you to attention and harp trills stream by like stars. And, five minutes later, as the last of your three lives explodes in crimson flare, you're left reeling. All you learn from your first encounter with *Radiant Silvergun* is how much there is still to learn.

And it's this factor – the amount that there is to learn – that marks out *Silvergun*'s place in the scrolling shooter constellation. Before it, there were simply the tasks of diligently collecting every power-up, devotedly honing your reaction time, and systematically memorising every attack wave. But Treasure brought the full weight of its inventive power to a genre whose conventions were already becoming entrenched. Immediately lost were the power-ups, smartbombs and extra-life pick-ups that had become the core of the experience. Now, every weapon and every attack type was available from the first moment of the game. Next, each of these, like an RPG hero's sword, could be upgraded through use, gaining power and capabilities with each hit you scored. It was a decision that at once introduced flexibility and strategy into a genre which had previously had next to none, and which ended the frantic scramble for pick-ups that made death in games like *Gradius* and *R-Type* so wretchedly ignominious.

Nonetheless, it was a decision that left most new players struggling to learn simply which button did what, before facing them with the task of learning the subtleties of each shot type and in which situations it could be used best. Many enemies, some of the architecture and most of the typically grandiose bosses required a puzzle-solving approach to matching your offensive skills to their defensive weaknesses, removing entirely the twitch and memory tests that earlier games had relied on for their challenge. Then, once this was mastered, came the task of deciding which attack to level up and in what order: *Silvergun*'s levels have to be mapped not just in terms of where you fly but what you shoot – and, of course, what you shoot *at*, since the game's aggressively complex colour-coded combo system added yet another layer of strategy.

It's a layer that can be ignored, of course – there's nothing to stop you finishing it as a straight-laced, squint-eyed twitch sprint – but to do so is to play the game in black and white, missing out on the colour that the red, blue and yellow targets bring to the

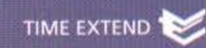




The audacity of this boss design (top) doesn't take the focus away from the vibrant bread and butter of the sprite-based sections or the menu screens

gameplay. Novices content themselves with taking out three at a time to maximise their score; experienced players chase the 'secret' chains, picking off one of each colour in sequence to massively increase their ranking. Experts juggle these trifling concerns with the challenge of achieving weapon bonuses, the simplest of which asks you to fire 200 consecutive shots without missing once. And then come the bosses, which, in a staggering bit of subversion, have the temerity to self-destruct if you can't kill them fast enough. And so their challenge, beyond simply staying alive and cracking their puzzles, becomes maximising the destruction you can bring about before they spiral off into space.

It's a densely interwoven system of



The game's opening anime – and its cute characters – don't really do justice to the scale and urgency of the story they reveal: Earth attacked by a strange artefact and humanity destroyed except for three orbiting space pilots and their commander. The main game does better justice to the sense of utter desolation and the need for desperate revenge



fighting and scoring that would be enough to mark the game out on its own, and it would have been reasonable to lay its complexities over a foundation of traditional enemies and geometric attack patterns, with nothing tougher to contend with than a gradual ramping up of frequency and intensity. Instead, *Silvergun* is built from hundreds of tiny attack vignettes – *Wario Ware* gameplay morsels strung together to form a single, unpredictable narrative. It takes the shmup and turns it from an endurance test to an adventure. What will happen next? What will there be to see? And the answer to that is usually this: everything.

Had it come earlier in the Saturn's lifespan, *Radiant Silvergun* would have changed the course of the debate concerning whether Sega's console or Sony's PlayStation was the more capable machine. Treasure may have become synonymous with wringing every last drop of performance out of a console, but rarely has the company demonstrated so clearly how much more hardware had to give than had been previously asked of it. Sprites were detailed and vibrant, the 3D worlds over which they skimmed as much a technical showcase as an aesthetic wonderland. Space shooters have unusually easy laurels to rest on – robots, lasers, starfields – but Treasure let rip a marriage of futurist abstraction and anthropomorphic detail that wasn't to be seen in as pronounced a manner again until Tetsuya Mizuguchi's *Rez*, and hardly ever since.

Looking back, *Radiant Silvergun* stands as a signpost to a road shmups chose not to take. Visually spectacular, epic in its story and production, ambitious in its integration of puzzle and RPG elements, radical in its combo and score systems, and complete with boss designs so dynamic they foreshadow the David and Goliath drama of *Shadow Of The Colossus*, it was a bold vision for what is often the driest of genres. Since its release, nothing has been able to match its scope, as the main focus of shmup designers turned instead into burrowing ever deeper into the esoteric possibilities of grazing through bullet hells in search of an optimum score. You only need look to Kenta Cho's *rRootage*, which uses the same engine to model *Psyvariar*'s bullet grazing, *Ikaruga*'s bullet absorbing and *Giga Wing*'s bullet-reflecting combat systems, to see how restricted – if elaborately explored – the scrolling shooter's territory has become. Even Treasure had to turn away from the scale of the challenge it had created, choosing instead to break new ground with the puzzly quirks of *Bangai-O*, the artful austerity of *Ikaruga* and the master's return of *Gradius V*.

Nothing has been able to match its scope, as the main focus of designers turned instead into burrowing deeper into the esoteric possibilities of grazing through bullet hells

And yet, with all of that said, *Silvergun* remains a game more famous for its retail value than its creative accomplishments, something even those who dismiss it as over-complicated and dislike it for its 'lack of purity' are happy to agree is a huge injustice. The irony of Treasure's game is that of all the titles heralded as greats, it's one that you most need to experience for yourself to understand its achievements. But, thanks precisely to it being heralded as a great, it has one of the highest barriers to entry of any. Happily, recent advances mean that those comfortable with delving into the grey area of emulation can play it in all its glory. For everyone else, a trip to eBay is the only answer. But don't despair: in a collector's market, the words 'spine-card missing, cracked CD cover' may be the abracadabra that gives you affordable entry to Treasure's richest Aladdin's cave.



The Radiant Sword, charged by sweeping up pink bullets, is the nearest the game comes to a smartbomb, sweeping enemies – even those capable of ogreish evasion and family love – aside



DOG TIRED

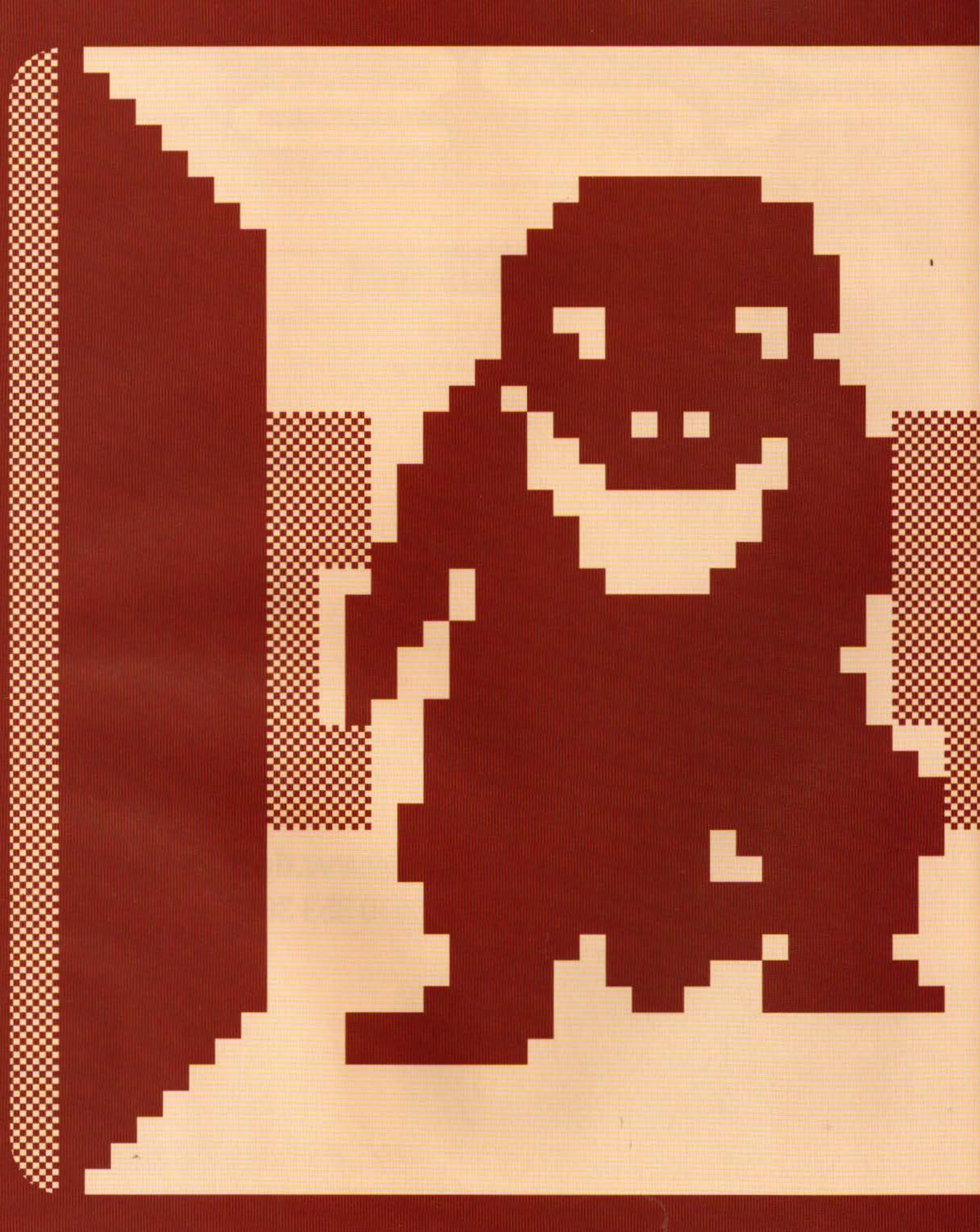
Throughout the game are hidden tiny animated coloured dogs, which can only be found by searching for them with one particular weapon. Although finding all the 'Merry-chans' provides no benefit other than extra points, it still becomes an obsessive pursuit, especially as the Saturn version collects the ones you have found in the options screen.



PORT FORWARD

The game was first released on the Sega Saturn's arcade counterpart, the ST-V, although the project was initially designed around the console's architecture. There are a number of differences between the home and arcade versions (both of which are included in the complete Saturn package): in Saturn mode giant boss Xiga has a point bonus of 1,998,530 (reflecting the release date of the home version of the game), as well as fully voiced anime cutscenes.





THE MAKING OF... 3D MONSTER MAZE

For one generation, 3D Monster Maze showed that games could invoke emotion. Mostly panic and terror...

FORMAT: **SINCLAIR ZX81** PUBLISHER: **JK GREYE SOFTWARE** DEVELOPER: **MALCOLM EVANS** ORIGIN: **UK** RELEASE DATE: **1981**

Malcolm Evans does not look like a man who creates nightmares, but then *3D Monster Maze* was never meant to be a nightmare. It was never meant to have a monster. It was never meant to be a game. At least, not in the beginning.

When an electronics engineer considering moving into programming was given a Sinclair ZX81 as a birthday present from his wife there was no sign that it'd end in shock and evisceration for an early generation of gamers.

Recalls Evans: "It was almost a joke, actually" – which may have been many people's reactions at the first sight of Sinclair's tiny machine. Evans was a hardware designer in the aerospace industry, used to working with the most advanced microprocessors. By comparison, the ZX81 was little more than a toy. It did, however, offer him an opportunity. He'd been curious to have a go at writing the code that ran on the chips he helped design, but had no real software experience. His approach to careers advice had not proved fruitful. "They turned around and said: 'You're too old to go into software'," he recalls. Now he had his opportunity to program. He would build a maze.

"Suddenly, I had this computer in front of me and I had to find something to do with it. I didn't want to just sit there playing games on it, and producing a maze was something you could see, you could see it working."

It was the visual aspect that cemented that decision. With only



ROLL UP, ROLL UP,
SEE THE AMAZING
TYRANNOSAURUS REX
KING OF THE DINOSAURS
IN HIS LAIR.
PERFECTLY PRESERVED
IN SILICON SINCE
PREHISTORIC TIMES, HE
IS BROUGHT TO YOU FOR
YOUR ENTERTAINMENT
AND EXHILARATION.

Although the player could outrun the lumbering Rex, panicked flight usually ended with disorientation and a literal dead end

LOW RESOLUTION, HIGH PERFORMANCE

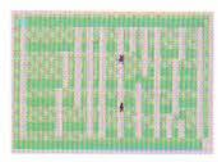
The ZX81 didn't really have pixel graphics; Sir Clive Sinclair's machine handled only text. As a compromise, however, the character set included several blocky graphics characters along with the usual letters and symbols. When stitched together these could be used to make images, like Teletext but with an even lower resolution. This had the advantage that there was no speed difference between drawing a giant Tyrannosaurus Rex and a page of words, as to the ZX81 they were both simply character strings. As a bonus, screens could be constructed in memory and then switched into view instantly, avoiding any flickering.

The individual pixels of later machines struggled to offer a similar impact. "I wanted to do *3D Monster Maze* on the Spectrum, and I came to the conclusion that it couldn't be done with the speed or the graphics," Evans recalls. It wasn't the maze, it was Rex. He was just too big to survive in an age of colour, high-resolution displays better adapted to small, scurrying sprites. It wasn't until the 16bit era began that such giant opponents could once again roam the earth.

Evans made several attempts to recreate his monster in later games. *3D Escape* (below left) on the Spectrum uses a topdown maze, which is essentially expanded from the 2D maze used to develop Rex's hunting abilities. It features a number of different creatures to make up for the wider perspective, although the first level begins with just the player and Rex.

Corridors Of Genon (below right) featured a cylindrical maze occupied by short, Q*Bert-like creatures that would essentially throw up on you. These enemies were the largest creatures Evans could satisfactorily animate on the screen, and despite arriving in increasing numbers in order to make up for their small stature, often appeared more comical than terrifying.

The game did eventually make its way on to the Spectrum some 16 years after its original release courtesy of ZX81 emulation expert **Russell Marks**. Did he have problems reanimating Evans' monster? Frankly, yes. Despite the Spectrum's increased raw grunt the graphics still posed problems, as it lacked enough speed to redraw the entire screen each frame. "It wasn't too bad, but I remember it looking a bit rough on the screen you get when you find the exit," Marks recalls.





the bare machine and Sinclair's built-in BASIC it helped immeasurably if you could see errors in your program just by looking at the screen. He rapidly developed a system that could generate 16x16 square mazes, each square either corridor or wall, and display this on the screen via a topdown view. With that done, there was still more to learn. Assembly language beckoned, so Evans added a routine to display what the maze looked like for someone standing inside it.

"[It was] just the next step in learning or visualisation or simply seeing what could be done. I was learning to program more than writing a game. That was why from the beginning it was in assembler not BASIC."

Evans' program was never meant to be a game, nor something for anyone else to use; it was a simple learning exercise, a harmless experiment. Fate, however, was to step in when Evans met John Greye at a classical guitar club in Bristol. Greye had developed a number of ZX81 games and was in the process of setting up a company to sell them commercially.

"I mentioned to him in passing that I was writing this program, and he said: 'Has it got a monster in it?'" recalls Evans. "It hadn't, so he said: 'Oh, it might be a good idea to put a monster in it, then it might be saleable, you see'. I had nothing better to do, so I created a monster."

No crack of lightning, no peal of thunder, just a casual suggestion and more intellectual curiosity. Evans chose to reanimate Tyrannosaurus Rex, king of the dinosaurs. Why? The Minotaur might have been more classically apt. Perhaps Nosferatu, as a nod to the host machine's silent black-and-white images. Maybe it came from a half-remembered nightmare, pursued by the slavering beast, unable to escape? No. It was just handy. "[It] was taken from one of the kids' books," he remembers, although sadly not which one. "Everything I ended up drawing was from a book. Not the form, but the idea."

Despite his humble origins, Rex was a giant. Evans began his design with the last thing the poor victim would see – the monster filling the screen, lunging forwards, teeth bared. Nobody had made such a massive opponent before, but in those early days nobody knew what was and wasn't possible. Evans was finding out what he could do, and a giant animated dinosaur, it turned out, was fine.

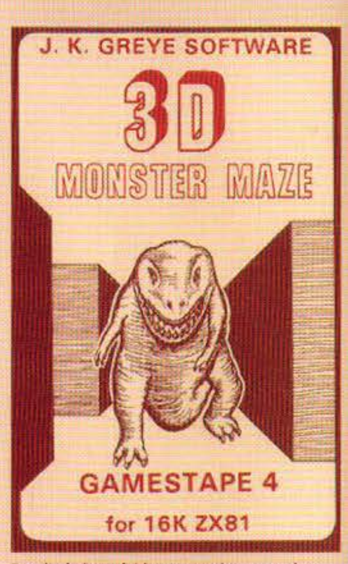
Once the grisly end was set, he then made smaller images to represent the beast further and further away. Players, of course, would experience this sequence rather more often in the reverse order. Evans' focus was on trying to make the graphics as smooth and fast as possible. Rex was just a vehicle to let him learn.

"I was always being accused of graphics being more important than the game itself, which is exactly right. I'd been setting a problem, seeing if I could solve it, and then creating a game out of it. I was working out how to use the graphics all the time."

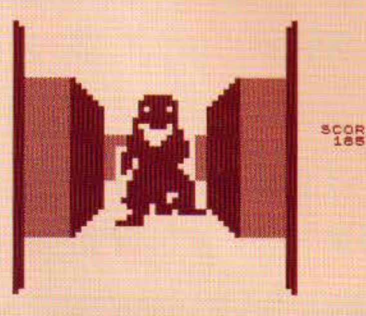
In the absence of art packages, Rex first came to life on graph paper. Evans' years of electronics experience allowed him to convert the black and white squares into data, which wife Linda would then type into the computer.

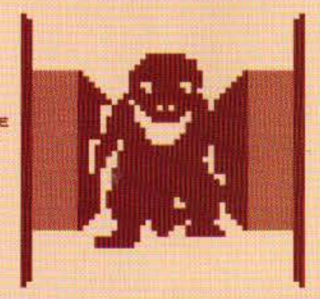
There was no need for side or rear views of the monster. After all, if you ducked into a side passage to hide, hoping to be spared, you'd be in for a shock: the AI had only one mission.

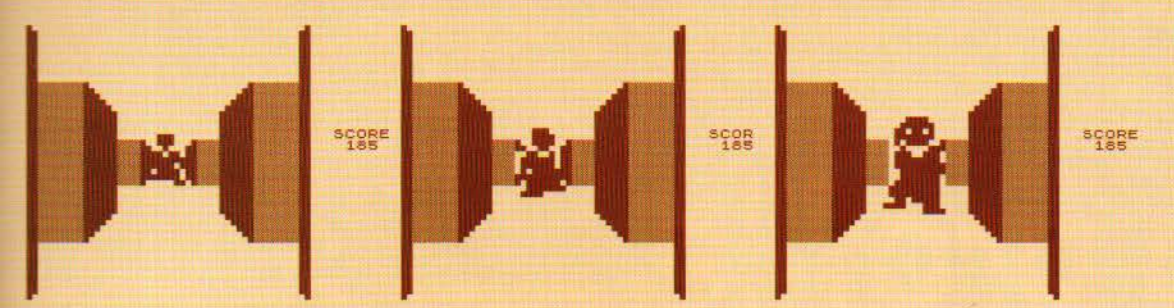
"He's aiming straight at you all the time," Evans explains. "He is quite intelligent. It's not like *Pac-Man*, just random. He's after you." Rex's behaviour developed apart from his image as a rather less intimidating single blip in the 2D program written to originally test the maze generation. Once



Despite being a fairly accurate interpretation of the game's form, the original cassette inlay didn't exactly convey the game's suspense and terror – somehow, Rex seems friendlier as a line-drawing than in teeth-gnashing pixel form







Evans was happy that the monster's hunting of the player was flawless, he was brought into the 3D world.

Rex took full and immediate advantage of this opportunity, and promptly devoured his creator. "Quite a few times the monster would come up on me with absolutely no warning whatsoever and I'd jump out of my skin," chuckles Evans. His wife's reaction to his plight was unsympathetic: "She would burst out laughing." The realisation had dawned, though, that Evans had literally created a monster.

"It was then I thought: 'Right, I've got to put something more into it to actually warn people because it's so sudden'. If you were facing in the wrong direction, he was just there – you'd get no indication whatsoever – so I then started putting in messages saying where he was."

It may have reduced the shock when Rex pounced on the author, but players panicked into flight by the sudden announcement that 'HE HAS SEEN YOU' when they hadn't seen him might dispute the calming effect of these messages.

This voracious predator had altered the feel of the program dramatically. The firstperson view gained an air of claustrophobic menace. The focus had shifted. It used to show what was in front; now it didn't show what was behind. The simple left, right and forward controls were suddenly distinctly lacking reverse. There was no doubt about it: Evans had a game. It was time to show his progress to Greye.

"[Grey] said, 'Right, all it needs is a title screen now and we can probably sell it'. I thought: 'Let's make it interesting…'"

Why on earth would a player be in a maze being chased by a dinosaur? Because a clown suggested it, of course. Evans produced an elaborate scrolling text introduction, a 'Roll up! Roll up!' carnival pitch. "It was more than a clown, it was a ringmaster," claims Evans. "That was put in because I was worried that it could frighten someone," which in retrospect is probably a slight understatement. "It was half-serious because it carries on to say that the management take no responsibility, just to be on the safe side." It certainly added to the surrealism, as though this were an episode of The Avengers or The Twilight Zone.

One last touch added a psychological twist to the ending. When (and not 'if', since it was inevitable) the player was eaten, they were offered the chance to either play again or quit. However, there was only a 50 per cent chance that their 'appeal' would be granted. Otherwise, they'd find themselves plunged straight back into the nightmare maze. Evans' justification?

"There's something wicked about me, I think. I thought, if you're stuck in the maze, let's make it real and say, OK, you *are* stuck it in the maze. Perhaps if they want to get out they can, but if not they can stay in there and they have to pull the plug out."

Whatever the reasoning, Evans had written the game that would come to define its host platform. Appearing early in the ZX81's life, it had a polish and attention to detail that made it stand out from the crowd. Three years on from its release it was still selling in huge numbers, giving gamers a taste of what the future had to offer.

What about its place in history? Was *3D Monster Maze* the original firstperson corridor shooter? Given that it was never released in the US, its influence on *Doom* et al is probably less than you might like to think. There's also the critical difference – the player isn't armed. Evans never even considered the possibility of fighting back against Rex. (That would have been just too ridiculous.) This is not to deny its place in gaming history, just that we might be looking at the wrong branch of the gaming tree.

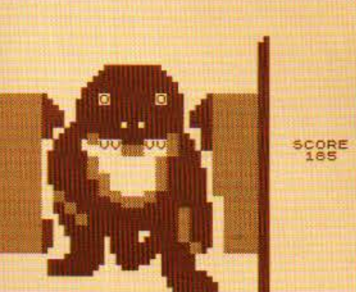
Ask any player and they'll tell you what *3D Monster Maze* was chiefly about: fear, panic, terror and facing an implacable, relentless foe who's going to get you in the end. At its heart *3D Monster Maze* is the original survival horror game – perhaps the last thing anyone, even its author, expected to find when they first picked up that innocent-looking little plastic box.

"Quite a few times the monster would come up on me with no warning whatsoever and I'd jump out of my skin. My wife would burst out laughing"



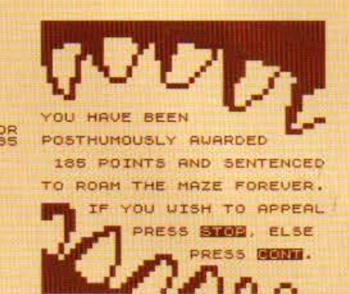


Originally sold by mail order through adverts in computer magazines, orders to supply WH Smith brought *3DMM* massive success. Two years later, Evans' own New Generation Software was still advertising, and selling, his first game









Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

■ **COMPANY NAME:** Pivotal Games Ltd

■ **DATE FOUNDED:** 2000

■ **NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 82

■ **STUDIO HEADS:** (Below, left to right, with Krishnan Guru-Murthy) Alex McLean (technical director), Nick Cook (director of development), Jim Bambra (managing director)



■ **URL:** www.pivotalgames.com

■ **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY**
Conflict: Desert Storm (PC, Xbox, PS2, GC), *The Great Escape* (PC, Xbox, PS2), *Conflict: Desert Storm II* (PC, Xbox, PS2), *Conflict: Vietnam* (PC, Xbox, PS2), *Conflict: Global Storm* (PC, Xbox, PS2)







Pivotal's *Conflict* series has reached the number one spot in the UK charts on several occasions

PIVOTAL GAMES



■ **LOCATION:**
Near Bath, UK

■ **CURRENT PROJECTS:**
Undisclosed next-gen projects for Eidos

■ **ABOUT THE STUDIO**

"Originally founded in 1996 as Pumpkin Studios, Pivotal Games was re-established in 2000 and has gone on to win awards for its products and the studio. In the last three years Pivotal Games has had five major chart successes in the UK (including three number ones) with the *Conflict* series and *The Great Escape*.

"To date, the company's games have sold over six million units worldwide. Pivotal Games, an Eidos Interactive studio, is one of the most successful British games developers and prides itself on developing cutting-edge, high-quality games on time and to budget. A number of next-gen titles are currently in development.

"There's a great working environment at Pivotal with a relaxed and professional atmosphere. To quote one member of staff: 'It's a great opportunity to work on a great project with a great team in a great location!'"



Facing the future

Next-gen consoles have plenty of processing grunt – but what to use it for? Better facial animation is one emerging focus


Doug Perkowski, CEO, OC3 Entertainment

www.oc3ent.com
www.softimage.com
www.image-metrics.com/index.htm

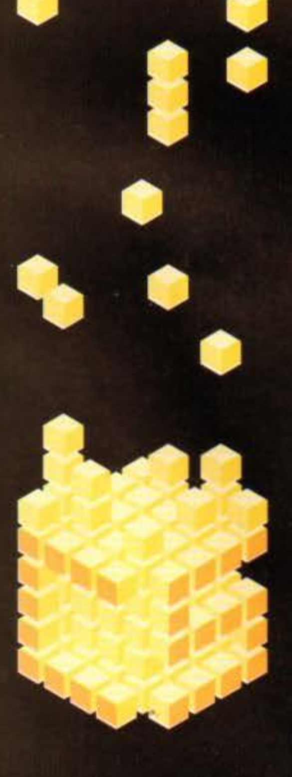
If the original PlayStation was about 3D graphics, then PlayStation 2 was supposed to be about emotion – according to Sony's marketing department, that is. But the fact the much-hyped Emotion Engine didn't quite live up to expectations was as much a product of audience satisfaction as technical limitations. When it came to the cash tills, gamers seemed happy with the expansive 3D worlds of *GTA* and *Need For Speed* rather than the emotionally led experiences such as Konami's tricky time-travelling *Shadow Of Memories* or Atari's more recent *Fahrenheit*.

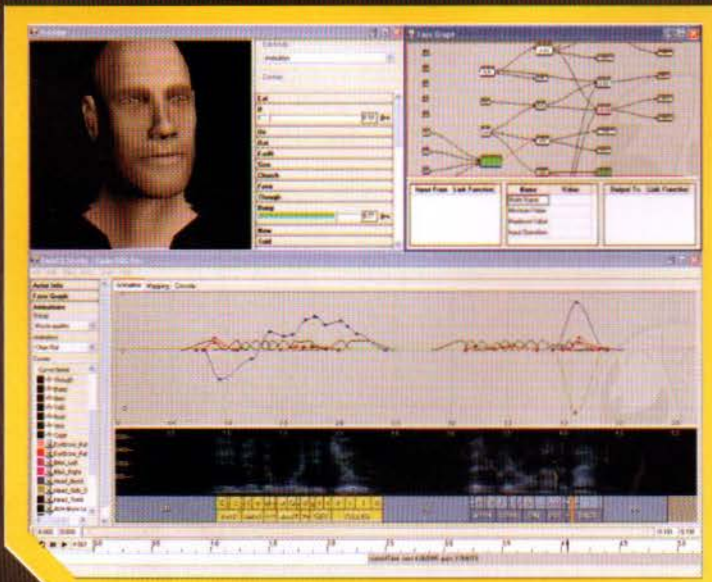
Still, some developers nurture the dream that this new generation of consoles will have the capabilities to do something truly groundbreaking. Indeed David Jaffe, creator of the *Twisted Metal* and *God Of War* games, as recently as last month went on record claiming that developers need to create games with soul. It's certainly a feeling enthusiastically reflected among tools companies working in facial animation.

"On one level, facial animation can be seen as just another sexy feature to help a game stand out graphically, but the technology also has the potential to enable more compelling storylines and more engaging characters," says **Doug Perkowski**, CEO of US toolshop OC3 Entertainment. "People always talk about creating games that make you cry, and I guarantee the games that do will have great facial animation."

Of course, there's a sense that Perkowski, like many in this field, is a man with a home-made hammer. As the head of a small facial-animation middleware company, everything he sees looks like a nail just waiting to be pounded in (or a face requiring animation, of course).

It's a situation he's well aware of, however. "Ever since I graduated, I've been excited about talking characters, but it always seemed to a little bit off in the future," he says. The power of next-gen consoles convinces him that now is finally the right time. And with the company's FaceFX product integrated

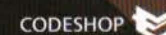




OC3's FaceFX

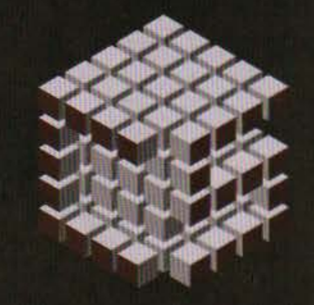
The key feature of FaceFX is the way it combines automatic lip synchronisation with flexible tools that enable artists to add individual mannerisms to their characters. The lip syncing works by analysing an audio dialogue file and then breaking it down into the phoneme shapes associated with various letters and word fragments. This generates the baseline character animation. Using the FaceFX Studio tools, artists can take this and add more characterisation by moving eyebrows, creating frowns or even loading new textures or normal maps to create the overall performance. The finished animation, which is defined by processor-light animation curves, is then loaded directly into the game engine. The next step in the product's development will be FaceFX Live, which will work in realtime online, enabling players to talk into their microphones and see their game avatars aping their words, complete with lifelike animation.

Featuring a realtime previewer, as well as scene graph and studio editors, FaceFX provides animators with an open framework to automatically generate lip synchronisation and then add more subtle ambience





Perhaps the best example of facial animation in a game to date has been Valve's *Half-Life 2*. But while it displayed some breathtaking graphics, the fact there were only 15 cutscenes in a 25-hour game demonstrates the huge amount of effort it takes to create great facial animation. New animation tools will make the process quicker and less complex



within Epic's potentially generation-defining Unreal Engine 3, it may be the perfect timing both in terms of business and technology.

Another company pushing the limits of facial animation is Canadian tools provider Softimage. Senior product manager **Gareth Morgan** reckons there are good financial reasons for developers to up the realism levels of their game characters.

"People are worried about the cost of next-gen games, and one way of dealing with this is to broaden the audience and sell more games," he points out. "When you make games for 14-year-olds, characters are just targets. To appeal to a wider demographic requires theatrical, emotive and narrative content, and for that to happen you need lifelike characters. At Softimage, that's always been our focus so we're very excited about this evolution."

Known for its XSI modelling and animation package, which was used by Valve in making *Half-Life 2*, Softimage surprised the industry in 2005 by revealing a separate technology demonstration entitled Face Robot.

"Face Robot is an example of taking something that is prohibitively expensive because it's so complicated and time-consuming, which is digital face animation, and turning it into a new tool," Morgan explains. "What we want to do is release artists from having to learn a battery of technical knowledge, which can often obliterate their creative talent, and make it simple for them to get great results."

Perhaps the most interesting approach in this area comes from UK company Image Metrics. Unlike OC3 or Softimage, which sell pieces of software, it operates an animation service. One reason for this is the way its technology works: instead of streamlining an artist's workflow or providing a new tool, Image Metrics creates realistic animation by simply analysing a video of an actor performing the required moves.



"The trick is to find a clever way to connect real motion to a computer-generated character"

Of course, there's little that's simple about deconstructing the subtle movements of the human face and mapping them to a computer-generated mesh – but it is, at least, simple to understand how the process works.

"We think to produce believable content, you have to model the real world," says Image Metrics' chief technology officer **Gareth Edwards**. "Pointing a camera at someone and working out what's going on is a good way of doing that. The trick is to come up with a clever way of connecting that real motion to a computer-generated character so we can capture the authenticity. That's essentially what we do."

But as useful as all these tools are, the true test of their validity will only be seen in the types of games developers and publishers choose to create. And that, as everyone understands, is the one problem technology is powerless to completely solve.



Softimage's Face Robot

Still in a state Softimage calls a 'technology preview', Face Robot is an attempt to solve one of the most difficult problems in computer animation. The human face is incredibly expressive and because we spend a lot of our time, and brain power, trying to distinguish how emotions are displayed, we often find such computer animation crude – just ask the animators who worked on Square's Final Fantasy film. Face Robot works by simplifying the process. Instead of requiring animators to work with 150 discrete points on the face, as is required by facial motion capture for example, it reduces these down to only 32 interrelated points. The goal is to make realistic facial animation much quicker, while keeping high quality. Softimage claims Face Robot should improve an animator's productivity by 80 per cent.

Softimage's Face Robot reduces the level of complexity required to animate a character's face by using a skin solver system which uses a mere 32 points of reference on the skin's surface to interpolate the overall shape

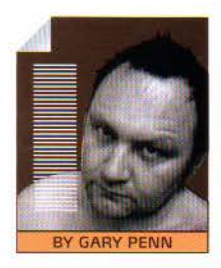


Image Metrics

Used in such animated films as Polar Express as well as games, Image Metrics' technology analyses video footage of an actor's facial performance and then generates animation that can be applied to a 3D head and combined with the recorded dialogue. At the moment, however, analysing how the face moves is a processor-heavy task which requires a couple of days to produce, and so is generally used for creating cutscenes. One goal for the company is to use its experience to create a realtime system that could combine libraries of preprocessed animation with the ability to blend them with new assets. There's even the possibility it could run a cut-down version of the system to analyse video footage from console cameras, which developers could then incorporate into avatars.



One of the tricks of Image Metrics' system is you can directly use the facial performance of an actor to drive an in-game character, whether that's human or not


BY GARY PENN

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Information design

Computer and videogame design is typically thought of in terms of the person who had The Big Idea without consideration for a wealth of other design and how it all interrelates. There's so much design involved in even the simplest computer or videogame – most of it instinctive, unwritten.

Software design; audio-visual design (and its many subsets); toy design (as in the design of what you play with); playscape design (as in the design of where you play); play design (the design of activities, as in how best to exploit the toys within the playscape); game design (as in rules, structure and direction for activities with objectives for focus); product design (as in how everything fits together to form a cohesive whole); interface design (as in the means of conveying audio, visual and tactile information to and from players); and one not so formally prominent area: 'information design', which amounts to what do you need to know, when, how and why.

The design of special effects, ceremonies (as in the formal recognition of key moments) and story are all subsets of information design. Much of the wealth of information conveyed in computer and videogames happens without conscious information design.

How are you supposed to know how to play, what to do, where to go, where you are in the bigger picture? How do you know you are even allowed to play? (The letterbox effect is the established shorthand for 'Play Suspended: Cinematic Ceremony In Progress'.) How do you know what's good and bad? How do you know the status of your toy and the other toys in play? How do you know if you or your opponent is on the verge of being removed from play, that your vehicle is about to explode? You ask yourself myriad questions in play, often without realising it until answers aren't forthcoming.

Consider a button. Its colour, shape and general condition are all suggestive – as is a label saying 'DO NOT PRESS'. Of course, you press the button. Nothing happens – nothing appears to happen. You push it and it clicks. Meh. You push it again and a red light burns brightly and an angry buzzing sound is heard. That's more interesting. If pressing the button results in screams emitting from the room next door, and those screams are clearly pained and female, until they stop, no matter how often or how long you press the button... Pressing the button is now very interesting, all because of the information given and the way it's conveyed.

That guy coming towards you exudes information – his appearance, his performance can tell you everything you need to know. The way he's dressed. The way he carries himself. The way he moves. Even how quickly he moves. Everything about him says something – some things more than others (and more important than others). Without careful consideration on the part of the designer, the guy could give off the wrong signals – especially to someone with an alternative cultural background.

> It's only when you see your lovingly crafted, perfectly realised design in the hands of real players do you realise how 'stupid' they are 

Mind you, even your fellow citizens don't always see your sentiment... It's only when you see your lovingly crafted, perfectly realised design in the hands of real players do you realise how 'stupid' they are, which really means how stupid and inconsiderate you are as a designer. What you thought was obvious, what you took for granted, what you didn't even consider in fact throws players into turmoil – or they completely overlook the intent.

In *Denki Blocks!* the 'map' used to show how blocks should be arranged to solve the puzzle originally relied on simplistic interpretations of the toys. But some players thought that the tiny gaps between the blocks in the miniature representation of play meant the same applied in play and went insane trying to figure out how to copy what they saw, so it had to be changed.

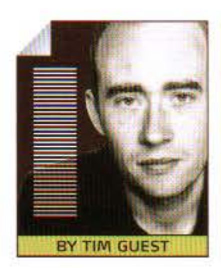
Designers can go mad trying to pre-empt how the audience will think – not to mention trying to naturalise the information and make it feel part of the environment. The attempt to naturalise information in *The Getaway* was a commendable failure. The bloodstain to reflect the health of your character was too vague, as were the vehicle indicators blinking to show which way to go. We went through the same considerations with *GTA* but arrived (as many others who tread the same path) at supernatural solutions such as an arrow to show the way.

When designing playscapes or moments without rigid constraints (as the likes of *GTA*), you can't always predict what players will do, even if the information you give them couldn't be more explicit. Such conditions play havoc with how and when information is presented. You could be in the middle of anything when the information needs to be given and the flow of play could easily be interrupted.

Information design is an overwhelmingly vast, seldom-mined seam of delights – a fulfilling, humbling, invaluable area of interest. A great deal of psychology can be employed to anticipate and address information design issues, but a designer's most valuable tools are common sense and a consideration for others.

Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki


Illustration: Istokes


BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN

The drug of a nation

Where there's money, there's an addiction', Martin Amis wrote. The reverse is also arguably true: where there's an addiction, there's money. There is now so much money in online gaming (projected to top $5.2 billion this year) that, suddenly, the world is taking notice. In the last year, everyone connected with massive online virtual worlds has experienced an inrush of journalists, venture capitalist organisations, documentary makers and multinational entertainment corporations – to the extent that Terra Nova, the de facto blog for the new digital frontier, has christened the phenomenon, after the booming popularity of Blizzard's *World Of WarCraft*, 'The WOW wave'.

So there's money, now, flocking in to virtual worlds. But are the new virtual émigrés – an estimated 27 million – really addicted?

For answers, we might do well to turn to South Korea, where the global mania for virtual worlds has reached its peak. In part because of a mid-'90s government drive for broadband, South Korea is the most internet-connected nation on earth. Of the millions worldwide who live second lives online, almost a third are Korean. Each year, worldwide, over twice as many people visit Korean-made virtual worlds as visit Korea. *World Of Warcraft* was recently christened by one online wag 'the new golf'; you could say that skill with a virtual character, rather than with a pool cue, is the new emblem of a wasted youth. Virtual worlds offer the promise of paradise as well as the killing of time; the Korean government has begun to recognise the addictive effect of these two powerful pulls on Korean youth. Last year a law was passed limiting online gaming to those over 18. The game companies now (reluctantly) enforce the law by linking online accounts to government ID numbers – but the kids find ways around the ban. Two days after I arrived in Seoul, two policemen attempting to arrest a suspected rapist, Hyuong Kim, were stabbed to death. Kim became Seoul's public enemy number one. Police distributed 1,000 leaflets with his name, photo and ID number. Two days later, police received a tip-off: Kim was accessing the internet from the Samsung apartment block in Damno-Dung, northern Seoul. They barricaded the building and searched every apartment, scouring even the insides of washing machines. They found nothing. The next day, police discovered the culprit: a 14-year-old boy, who had seen Kim's ID number on the wanted posters, had used it to access an over-18 gaming site. Word spread. Soon, Hyuong Kim was logging on to play *Lineage II* from all over the city.

> "Real life doesn't often live up to our expectations, but in the game, anything can happen. I have been killed, I have been reborn"

In 2002, the South Korean government established the Internet Addiction Counselling Centre to help deal with the problem. I visited them to talk about the issue. According to **Hyam No Dung**, a clinical psychologist at the centre, more than two thirds of South Korean teenagers play online games and over a quarter think of themselves as internet-addicted. The centre offers addiction counselling for children sent by their parents or by the Korean cyber-police, who handle game-related crimes. The centre puts offenders through a re-education programme, then gives them community work – renovating old computers for charity, for example. "It's not easy," Dung told me. "It's much easier to achieve things in the game. When these kids face problems in the real world, they give up."

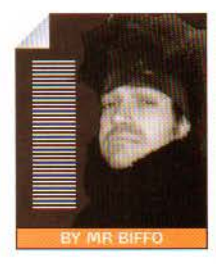
She showed me a handful of the questionnaires they use to measure internet addiction in people referred for treatment. Answers their young respondents had ticked again and again included: 'I have broken promises because of the internet'; 'On the internet, people acknowledge me more'; 'When I use the internet, I feel confident and free'.

The word 'addiction' comes from the Latin word for a type of slave. When we become addicted, we become slaves to a way of achieving our goals that makes us feel we have succeeded, but brings about no real change in our actual affairs. 'Nought's had, all's spent / Where our desire is got without content', as Shakespeare wrote in Macbeth. Eventually, the addict always finds their way to the place they were trying to avoid. The heroin addict seeks peace, but ends up in anguish. The gambling addict seeks success, but ends up broke. The gamer seeks excitement and community, but ends up with an empty life.

Or do they? While in Korea, I asked the king of *Lineage II* (the most successful among the game's players) what it was about the game, apart from community, that kept him playing – even as his real-world business slid towards bankruptcy. Was he addicted? He shook his head. "It's not addiction. It's a way to live a different life," he said. "Real life doesn't often live up to our expectations, but in the game, anything can happen. I have killed, I have been killed, I have been reborn. These are the things I can't do in real life. I don't own a car, but in the game, I can fly."

Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Granta





BIFFOVISION

Gone to launch

By the time you read this, the Xbox 360 will have been out about five months, and I bet there are still stock shortages. Retailers are taking orders as supplies start to filter down, but deliveries are sporadic. None of the retailers I've spoken to seem to know exactly when consoles will arrive. Consequently, the next generation of gaming hasn't arrived with a bang, but a sort of polite cough.

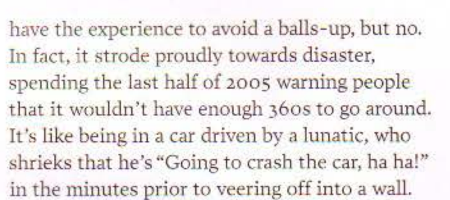
It never ceases to amaze me how console manufacturers seem to stumble into obvious problems. A small bowl of amoebic dysentery could've predicted that the Gizmondo and N-Gage would be end up as nothing more than footnotes in the history of gaming. Likewise, long before the Xbox 360 had launched, anyone could see that a simultaneous worldwide launch was an ill-fated strategy.

You'd have thought that a successful multinational corporation like Microsoft would have the experience to avoid a balls-up, but no. In fact, it strode proudly towards disaster, spending the last half of 2005 warning people that it wouldn't have enough 360s to go around. It's like being in a car driven by a lunatic, who shrieks that he's "Going to crash the car, ha ha!" in the minutes prior to veering off into a wall.

Just call me Daddy Hindsight, but if I were Microsoft I'd have stockpiled 360s, waited until *Halo 3* was ready, and launched with a massive, PS2-scuppering showcase in the US, six months before anywhere else. The European hardcore – the same hardcore who preordered a 360 midway through last year – would've bought a machine on import anyway, but at least every Stateside punter would've been able to get his hands on one. Then, six months on, Microsoft could've orchestrated a rollout in Europe which would've got 360s into the hands of everyone who wanted one at launch, rather than upsetting many preorderees. Finally, another few months later they could've focused their attentions on making the Japanese launch less of a limp fart than it has been.

But no, Microsoft decided to go with a different strategy. The sort of strategy that's up there with stapling bacon to the roof of your house, Sellotaping a couple of wires to it and hoping that maybe, somehow, it might provide an unlimited source of energy for your home.

It's difficult to know who Microsoft intended to benefit from the global instant-o-launch. Perhaps on the surface all that's happened is that a few people have had to wait a bit longer for their 360, but beneath the surface Microsoft has doubtless sowed seeds of distrust and resentment, and probably finished off any chance of its Xbox brand ever succeeding in Japan. The debacle has made the company look stupid and amateurish, and it all has the faint whiff of 32X about it.



"Unless Sony does something monumentally absurd between now and whenever it decides to release the PS3, it's going to clean up"

It's unlikely to mark the end of Microsoft's console dream. Microsoft is never going to give up on making the Xbox a market-leading brand, not while it still has an evil design to monopolise the way we're entertained. Nevertheless, the 360 launch will prove a setback to the system's longterm success.

Sony has been remarkably reserved regarding its PS3 plans – no doubt in part because it's been waiting to see what the competition did, and Microsoft played right into its hands by acting like an excitable seven-year-old – one who couldn't resist bringing his new birthday present to school, only to have it snapped in half by the class bully.

Don't get me wrong; the 360 is actually rather lovely. It's powerful, it's solid, there are a couple of OK games on there. And coupled to Xbox Live it's the machine that has finally lured me online in a way that the PC never could, slothful sofa-junkie that I am. Given my previous resistance to online gaming this is quite an achievement (my Xbox Live name is 'bront', incidentally, seeing as you pitiful skanks have already taken every alternative of 'Mr Biffo' there is). But I'm one of the lucky (stupid) few who managed to get one around launch day (admittedly only after cancelling my delayed Amazon preorder, and paying through the nose on eBay). Lord knows what everyone who missed out on their Christmas present thinks.

Let's face it, much as I love the purity of Nintendo's Revolution plans – blah blah forget about graphics blah it's all about gameplay blah – it's never going to gel with what the masses want. Sony has the brand and the marketing nous, and any headway the Xbox 360 might've gained has been crapped on by Microsoft launching too soon. And as for the "We're NEVER releasing a separate hard drive/Yes we are releasing a separate hard drive" announcements... what the hell were they thinking? Way to make your console look obsolete before it's even begun, sap-heads!

Unless Sony does something monumentally absurd between now and whenever it decides to release the PS3 – such as reveal the innards are constructed from the bones of orphans – it's going to clean up. Though if it wants to maintain goodwill, a few less prerendered demos passed off as in-game wouldn't go amiss.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television







Issue 160

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: Navy recruiting PlayStation experts

Saw a job ad in the local paper under the IT section: 'PlayStation experts required. Worldwide travel. Royal Navy (age 16-37). Join the team'. Question is, will my *Wipeout* skills be utilised or my knowledge of special moves get me the job? Would I have to include a list of games completed on my CV or respectable high scores?
VastikRoot

It's just a way of grabbing kids' attentions – now they can fly planes and boats, destroy the German and Japanese armies singlehandedly, how much harder can it be with real bullets and a gazillion more buttons? You only need to play lots and lots of games to make sure you're really good at it, kiddies. Now, where did I leave that copy of *Administration and Accounting: Embezzlement Theory*?
Pause

So GameCube and Xbox experts aren't good enough for the Navy? Pah!
Chilly Willy

When I bought my 360, I was expecting the very best of what technology had to offer. Instead, I had to settle for a console that was governed by those who had a lower spec machine. People who bought a 360 Core package still had to purchase a £22.99 memory card for their game saves and therefore saved only £50 over the premium package. Is that worth the exclusion of a compulsory hard drive for all users? Do Core package owners really want to play a next-gen console using a wired controller? Why did Microsoft release a lesser version of their console and compromise those who want the very best? Obviously, it was to promote sales, and rushing the 360 out so soon has also boosted sales, but at what cost? It's common knowledge that technology is making a leap forward this year in terms of HD-DVD and Blu-ray discs, so is the 360 soon to be outdated? Microsoft's answer to this is to release an external HD-DVD drive, but who will want to spend more money on their console and who will want a clumsy external drive hanging off its side?
There have been so many reports of faulty machines to support suggestions that Microsoft may have rushed the release of the 360 in time for Christmas 2005. I personally have had to send my console back to Microsoft to have it replaced.

With all these problems and all these question marks hanging over the future of the 360, I feel that this is the most embarrassing launch of any console to date. I have been an Xbox lover for many years now, but unfortunately, I feel myself doing a 180 on the 360.
Joshua Van Hooke

It certainly seems that Microsoft could have produced the first million Xbox 360s in 'full-fat' flavour only and still struggled to keep up with demand. Perhaps it could've produced two million, five million, maybe even ten million and seen them snapped up. We shall never know. What's clear is that the scale of 360 customer dissatisfaction over non-supply will ensure that Microsoft doesn't make the same mistake with its next console. And that Sony will be doing everything it can to ensure that it doesn't follow suit with PlayStation 3.

I have trouble understanding publishers' desire to erase any trace giving away a game's origin. Few things are as annoying as a game localised to death

I was recently perusing a copy of E159 whilst recovering from a rather intense game injury only to 'shock' myself by reading your snippet on the *Pong* exhibit (Out There, p21). Imagine my surprise to be reading about this wonderful exhibit whilst recuperating from the injuries its marvellous PainStation dealt me.

'Damn, this is cool' I thought to myself right before realising that PainStation – nor Abertay where it currently resides – isn't really mentioned. I feel it's important to point out to those gamers out there who haven't really heard of this phenomenon that this game bites back. It has like a two-page disclaimer, and it can cause third-degree burns, swollen hands and paralysis of the left-hand side. It's fun, though: when you lose you get shocked, or whipped, or burnt, and there are fun minigames that involve breakout minefields and turbo pain. If anyone is able to get to it, I highly recommend it – it's in the Hannah McClure Centre in the Abertay Student Centre.
Jack WF

We have to ask: just how glowing are your recommendations of games that *don't* cause actual physical harm?

Regarding the feature on game localisation in E159, I have trouble understanding publishers' desire to erase any trace giving away a game's country of origin. To me, few things are as annoying as a Japanese gaming masterpiece that has been 'localised' to death for western audiences. Publishers should bear in mind that a huge number of European countries, including my own, never gets a localised version of a game. What we are offered is the American/English version. Fair enough, we can read English, but what I want is a localisation that keeps the original game as pristine as possible. All too often we get Americanised versions leaving a game unbearable to play through. Your article mentions *Disgaea* as an example of a game that retains original voices. Well, I don't know, but my PAL version of *Disgaea* only has American voices, which is why I haven't played past its introductory part. Another example of games I have been burned by in the same way is the *Project Zero* series.

There are many games I really want but choose not to buy because I know or suspect they have been destroyed by the publisher or its localisation staff. This is incomprehensible in an age where DVD movies feature a huge amount of language choices in both



spoken voices and subtitles. With DVD movies they don't cut away a movie's original voicetrack, do they? Why should they do so with games?
Svenn A Ramlo, Norway

It's here, unfortunately, that we have to fall back once more on the old 'it's because gaming, when compared to movies, is such a relatively young medium' excuse. In time it should become the norm for most games whose origins are perceived to be intrinsic to their make-up to be made available in a format that also allows the consumer to experience them in a manner closer to their native state. In the meantime, of course, some gamers are learning Japanese. That's *really* wanting to experience things in as pristine a state as possible.



Svenn A Ramlo slams the *Project Zero* series, and asks why game localisations need to so thoroughly mask the countries of origin

Despite all the hype that is being aimed at this Next Big Thing, I'm worried that PSP is going to be a complete farce of a console once it gets going. Proof of this theory comes twofold: 1) I know how most developers operate, and 2) I've borne witness to the horrendous fiascos that have preceded it. All portable game systems have been inflicted with the same disease by unthinking development houses and publisher pressure. Take the GBA as an example: this system has been forced to do pseudo-3D (which it can't really do) or cut-down versions of big console hits by lazy developers throughout its life. Instead, teams should have either made brand-new 2D games (which it can do incredibly well) or left the system alone completely.

All portable game systems have been inflicted with the same disease. Take the GBA – forced to do pseudo-3D or cut-down versions of bug console hits

Developers are obsessed with technical aspects, and specifically graphics, to the point that common sense goes out of the window. Of course, this doesn't mean developers 'try their damnedest to squeeze the best out of the machine', it simply means they are going to try to shoehorn a Tyrannosaurus Rex into a Smart Car. In terms of hardware power, the PSP may offer the closest-to-current-generation-specification portable gaming has seen thus far, but don't let that fool anyone. It is still out of date. It is underpowered when compared with the five-year-old PlayStation 2. And the situation is soon to get ten times worse. With PS2 near the end of its lifecycle, it's about to be replaced with next-generation hardware. Just in time to coincide with the PSP renaissance. So not only are we going to see virtually endless 'Specially Enhanced For PSP!' versions of PS2 favourites, the shelves are going to buckle under the weight of PS3 and Xbox 360 hand-me-downs that there is no way the PSP can do justice to.

Developers need to learn to see PSP as a format in its own right and tailor brand-new games specifically towards it, not completely destroy its reputation by forcing dedicated gamers such as myself to pick through its line-up with a fine-tooth comb in order to find games that actually should have been released.

Sorry for being pessimistic before the machine has really got going, but these are genuine concerns. PSP currently hosts a handful of games and already it has too many cut-down versions of PS2 games. I know for a fact that PSP developers are not going to do anything to prove this theory wrong.
Jonathan Tilbrook

It's really hard not to love Sony's PSP (when you're not massaging the feeling back into your hands after a prolonged session), and, yes, it's equally hard not to be thoroughly unmoved when *another* console handover is announced – and not only because such projects are routinely so ill-suited to gaming in a truly portable sense. We try to take solace in the fact that PSP is a valuable platform on which industry newcomers, especially artists, can cut their teeth.

I would like to support your choice of Sony as Publisher Of The Year for both the daring quality and innovation of their releases in 2005 but also for the astounding attention that they pay to their consumers' needs.

Sony have re-released *Ico*, a move that would puzzle most economists, but one that caters to the needs of PlayStation 2 gamers. Selling under 50,000 copies in the UK first time around, why would this be a good candidate for re-release? Gamers have evolved, is why. Products such as the EyeToy, the DS and the upcoming Revolution have shown us that innovation is no longer a niche concept in the modern market, but rather a dominant species. By re-releasing *Ico*, Sony have confirmed this transition, as well as acknowledged the needs of gamers forced to pay £40+ for a copy on eBay. Thanks to their intelligence as a publisher, nobody need pay the price of ignorance. Much is owed to them.
Samuel Roberts

But would *Ico* have been re-released if *Shadow Of The Colossus* did not exist? You have to hope so, of course.

F

Topic: Gaming Good Deeds

I've just beaten Clayton and the Stealth Sneak on *Kingdom Hearts* because my girlfriend's daughter was having a tough time of it – it could have ruined the game for her. Now she's progressing again. I'm not bragging, it was purely altruistic. What gaming good deeds have you done?
Stu

Enlightening the parents of my daughter's eight-year-old mate that *GTA San Andreas* was a tiny bit unsuitable as a Chrimbo pressie (whilst the parents appreciated the advice, I've never seen as evil a stare as the one the lad gave me).
lloigor

I'm always sending my missus virtual gifts and letters on *Animal Crossing*. Saves a fortune in the real world.
Lukeim64

Playing Dark Ops games on *Perfect Dark Zero*, I always buy a Revive kit ahead of weapons and will nearly always drop a weapon for them – OK, there's a slight tactical advantage in bringing back those who would otherwise have to wait out the round, but it means that others get a better gaming experience and might encourage them to do the same for me and everyone else. I continue to do this despite the fact that less than one in five people actually say 'ta very much', and when they do they are always (in my simian experience) American. Jesus Jones, I'm a latter-day saint, don'tcha know, canonise me now! Saint Michael of the Pleased Gamers!
Uncle Monkey

My wife enjoys games like *Beyond Good & Evil*, *Fable*, *Dark Chronicle*, etc, but isn't really a dedicated gamer. She often gets stuck or doesn't have the dexterity to accomplish certain tasks, so I often sit there with her, acting as 'tag-man', jumping in to help out if she gets stuck or acting as a note-taker and reminding her of what she has to do next. Strangely, it's almost as enjoyable as playing the game myself, especially as it makes her happy.
darthjim

I've just been out to try to buy *We Love Katamari* on its day of release. I was dismayed to find that none of the retailers in Newcastle city centre seemed to be stocking it. When asked, they didn't really seem that bothered. In Game, a female employee said, "Oh, yeah, that looked quite nice. Is that out?" but her male colleague hadn't even heard of it.

What hope is there for an industry where quality, family-friendly titles can't attract any retailer interest?

I quit. Get me off this planet.
Chris Preston

And yet it debuted at the top of the all-formats chart. Don't leave us just yet.

Continued »



You'll forgive me if I don't shed any tears over the apparently parlous state of the videogame industry post-Xmas ('Discounts and Shortages Spell Trouble For Industry', Start, E159).

Having been a console fan throughout my childhood, I have only recently decided to come back to gaming to see what had changed since I hung up my N64 controller. I was largely enticed back by bargain prices, particularly of the original Xbox, in the run-up to Xmas. There's a huge back catalogue going back some four years and some incredible games now being sold brand-new for a tenner, not to mention the huge market for secondhand, along with the fact that there are still six months of original Xbox new releases planned.

So splashing out £200 on a brand-new Xbox along with around ten high-rated games seemed a much better bet than spending at least twice that on a new machine which, however impressive it might be to show off to friends, *still* only boasts a handful of games and no guarantee of a decent back catalogue in two years' time.

The 360 excluded, prices now may look bad for the industry, but they are fantastic for the punters like me, particularly the casual gamers who don't need to be first with the newest toys. Sure, I'll be watching what unfolds this year very closely, but it's going to take more than hype, bluster and a pile of FPS games to get me upgrading to next-gen – I want a solid and varied base of software before I make that step.
Lawrence Shaw

That all makes sense. But how many of us can really resist the smell of brand-new technology, fresh out of its box?



Topic: God Of War's Tits
I picked up a cheap copy of *God Of War* the other day and while I think it is a great game and an amazing achievement there a couple of things that tarnished the experience. One is the discovery that silicone implants date back to ancient Greece and by the look of things must predate the bra. Rather that enhancing the atmosphere of the game this pushed the thought into my head that I'm a grown man and should not be playing this immature crap.
monkeytown

Hate to be a spoilsport but those ladies are actually wearing historically correct clothing.
Dan Dare

Is this a thinly veiled "I've seen tits before" thread?
Google

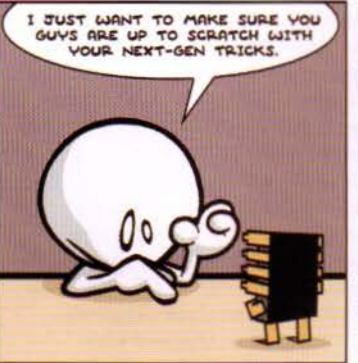
Just read Stinke's letter in E159. My partner always used to watch me play the *Resident Evils*, vicariously taking part by offering suggestions to puzzle-solving, etc. While I certainly don't subscribe to the 'you're a female, what would you know about games?' mentality, I always found this more annoying than helpful – a bit like sitting behind someone in the cinema who keeps offering up advice to the characters on screen. Couldn't say anything, though – you know what women are like.
Karl Savage

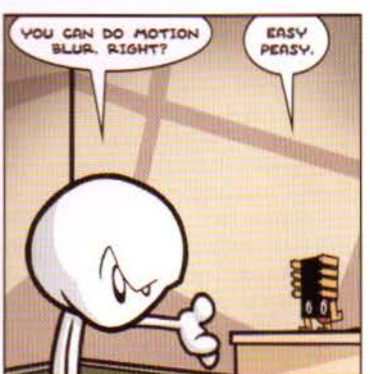
Oh, we do, we do: eminently capable of picking up their boyfriend's copy of **Edge**, reading the letters pages, seeing disrespectful references to their gaming uselessness, and then secreting an ice pick under the mattress. Awful stuff.

Send us email (**edge@futurenet.co.uk**), but be sure to use 'Inbox' as the subject line. Or send a letter to this address:
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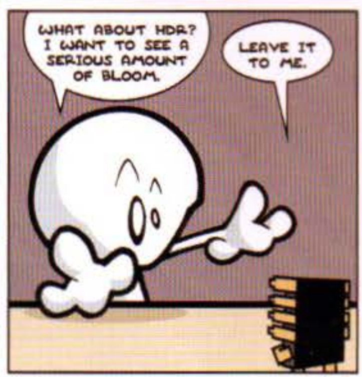
















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